

Blood of Farhun

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Contents

Road to Azir.....	1
The Bandits.....	20
Serpent Hills.....	36
Investigation.....	51
Blades in the Dark.....	59
Blades on the Road, Shadows in Mulhak.....	72
Tracking Rili.....	83
Stalls and Swords.....	98
Iron and Flame.....	103
Hard in battle.....	108

Road to Azir

The sun had only just begun to rise over the village of Farhun, casting a golden hue across the thatched rooftops and dew-covered fields. Inside a small stone cottage at the edge of the village, a young dwarf named Furg sat on a squat wooden stool, his shoulders still broadening with youth, but his arms already thick with hard-earned muscle. He hunched over a wooden bowl filled with thick-cut oats softened in goat's milk, steam curling up into the morning air. With each bite, he chewed slowly, savoring the warmth, then reached for a tin cup of cold water drawn from the well just before dawn. It tasted sharp and clear, and he gulped it greedily.



Finishing his meal, Furg wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and stood, stretching his limbs with a grunt. He stepped outside, the door creaking behind him, into the crisp morning air. The smell of earth and smoke drifted on the breeze. A stack of wooden blocks lay in the yard beside his father's toolshed. Grunting, he bent low and lifted them one by one, thick corded arms tightening as he shifted their weight from pile to pile. He performed his routine with the discipline of a soldier, sweat beginning to sheen across his brow despite the cool air.

An hour later, stripped to his breeches and barefoot, Furg dashed down the packed dirt trail leading from their home to a nearby stream. The water, though biting cold, welcomed him like an old friend. He plunged in with a grunt, surfaced with a gasp, and let out a bark of laughter. After several laps across the deeper section, he pulled himself onto the bank,

dripping and exhilarated. The rest of the morning he spent running the village roads, nodding at the few villagers already up and about.

Near midday, he cast a fishing line into a lazy bend in the stream, shaded by willow trees. After a long, quiet wait interrupted only by birdsong and the hum of insects, he caught three decent-sized trout. Back at the cottage, he gutted and cleaned them with practiced hands, grilling them over a fire pit until the skin crackled and the scent brought his father out of the barn.

“Smells like someone earned his lunch today,” his father said, a squat, bearded figure with hands as rough as bark and eyes as steady as river stones.

Furg grinned and handed over the largest fish. “Thought I’d share before you head back to the field.”

They sat together on a bench, chewing in silence for a time before Furg cleared his throat.

“Da... I’ve been thinkin’. I want to buy a weapon. Somethin’ simple. Maybe a short sword. A real one.”

His father’s chewing slowed. “A sword, eh? What for? Planning to leave the plow behind and chase dragons?”

Furg met his father’s gaze. “No, Da. But I want to be ready. There’s talk in the village about raiders seen on the north trail. And I’ve got hands strong enough now to do more than chop wood.”

The old dwarf was quiet for a long moment. Then he sighed and pushed his plate aside.

“Come with me.”

Inside the cottage, his father bent beside his bed and reached underneath. From beneath a woolen blanket he drew out a small wooden box. The latch clicked open, revealing a neat pile of silver coins. He counted five, each one glinting in the dim light, and held them out in his thick fingers.

“Been savin’ these for a new plowshare. But your safety matters more than furrows. Take it. Get yourself gear that won’t break the first time a blade touches it.”

Furg took the coins, his hand trembling slightly. “Thanks, Da. I’ll make it count. I promise.”

“You will,” his father said, ruffling Furg’s hair with a calloused hand. “But first, help me mend the cellar stairs before your mother falls through ‘em again.”

The rest of the day passed with Furg splitting logs, hauling buckets from the well, nailing fresh planks into the old cellar steps, and helping corral a wayward goat that had decided the cabbage patch was her new domain. The labor was honest and familiar, but now it stirred something new in his heart—an urgency, a hunger to step beyond the village’s edge with a blade at his hip and purpose in his stride.

By dusk, as the sun bled orange across the hills, Furg sat again outside the cottage, the five silver pieces in his pouch and the promise of adventure warming his bones more than any hearth ever could.

The dawn broke pale and quiet over Farhun, and Furg stood at the edge of the village road with a small satchel slung over his shoulder. Inside it, he had packed a simple meal: a wedge of coarse brown bread wrapped in cloth, two strips of dried venison, and a waterskin filled from the family well. His father had clasped his shoulder with a nod that said more than words, and now the young dwarf was walking a winding footpath through the hills, legs moving with a mixture of nervous energy and determination.

The morning passed under a mottled sky, clouds drifting slow above the rolling fields and sparse woodland. Birds chirped and the wind danced with leaves. After a few hours of steady walking, the land flattened, and the outskirts of the town Azir came into view—stone walls mottled with age, smoke curling up from chimneys, and the bustle of life just beginning to rise with the sun.

Furg stepped onto cobbled streets, eyes wide, drinking in the strangeness of it all. Merchants haggled, carts clattered over stone, and the smell of spiced meats and tanned leather hung in the air. He passed storefronts and vendor stalls, scanning every sign with anxious hope. A blacksmith's anvil rang somewhere to his left, and an old woman stirred a cauldron of something unidentifiable to his right. Time dragged as he wandered the streets, his eyes searching every hanging placard for something familiar or promising.



After what felt like half the day, he turned a corner and spotted a wooden sign swaying gently in the wind. Burned into the timber was the name: *Murkar's Fighters*. The letters were jagged, rough, like they'd been carved by a dagger more than a chisel. A boar's tusk was nailed above the sign like a trophy.

Furg walked up to the door, lifted a hand, and knocked. Nothing. He waited, then knocked again, firmer. Still silence. As he stepped back, the door creaked open just slightly with a long wooden groan.

He hesitated. Then, summoning a bit of nerve, pushed it gently open and stepped inside.

The hallway smelled of old sweat, oiled leather, and something vaguely metallic. Dust motes danced in the air as light slanted through shuttered windows. He moved forward, boots thudding softly on the worn planks, until he came to a doorless room on the right.

Inside was a mix of order and chaos. Weapons lined the walls—blunt swords, axes, a halberd with a chipped edge. Mounted boar and bear heads snarled silently from above, and a large deer skin lay stretched across the floor. A solid table sat at the room's center, strewn with curled papers, a heavy coin pouch, and a half-melted candle still stuck in its holder. A quill sat in a cracked inkpot, and beside it, an empty ale mug. Cabinets lined the far wall, their shelves stuffed with books and scrolls in no particular order.

Furg stepped inside, unsure whether to call out. He hovered near the doorway, hands clasped before him. Minutes ticked by, then more. Just as he began to wonder if he should leave, heavy footsteps echoed down the hallway behind him.

A tall figure filled the doorway—a burly elf, his broad shoulders and thick chest contradicting every tale Furg had ever heard about the race's daintiness. His hair was cropped short, a jagged scar traced down one side of his face, and his voice was sharp-edged.

"You lost, bearding?" the elf said, eyeing him with amusement.

Furg blinked and then cleared his throat. "N-no. I—I'm here to... I want to join the guild."

The elf snorted. "Join the Fighters Guild? You? Have you ever even held a blade, or are you planning to knit the enemy into submission?"

Furg flushed. "No. I mean, yes, I haven't—but I'm strong. I train every day. I can learn."

The elf folded his arms, clearly enjoying himself. "Learn? With what? Dreams and wishbones? This isn't a place for children with sticks."

Furg stepped forward slightly and opened his coin pouch. "I have five silver. My da gave it to me. To buy gear. I—"

At that, the elf burst into full laughter, stepping back and clutching his stomach. "Five silver? Oh, lad, that won't buy the sweat off a dead goblin in this town. The cheapest gear here's twenty gold at *least*."

Furg's shoulders sagged. He looked at the floor, heart sinking like a stone in a well. The dream he'd carried from his cottage all this way now felt like smoke in his fingers. Quietly, he turned toward the door.

Suddenly, a boot lashed out. Furg's legs went flying from under him, and he crashed to the floor with a yelp, the back of his head smacking the boards.

The elf leaned over him, sneering. "First lesson: never let your guard down."

Furg groaned, sitting up slowly, rubbing the back of his skull.

"Name's Ragarok," the elf said, offering no apology. "I'm the guild's quartermaster. You're lucky. I'm feelin' generous. You want in? You can have a bunk and a bite. But you'll wear training gear until you earn enough coin to stop being a liability."

Furg looked up, dazed but still determined. "I'll earn it. I swear."

"We'll see," Ragarok muttered. "Come on, I'll show you to the dorms."

He led Furg down a narrow hallway past rooms echoing with distant clatter. At the end was a room lined with six hay-stuffed mattresses, each with a threadbare blanket. A jug of water and a loaf of hard bread sat on a nearby table.

"This one's yours," Ragarok grunted, pointing to a bed near the window. "You'll train with the others in the morning. Be up before the sun, or I'll be throwing cold water on your head. Understood?"

Furg nodded, still rubbing his scalp. "Understood."

Ragarok was already turning away. "And beardling?"

Furg looked up.

"Next time someone kicks you down, make sure you get back up swinging."

As the elf disappeared down the hall, Furg sat on the mattress and looked around at the quiet room. The bread was hard, the water lukewarm, the blanket scratchy—but none of it mattered. He was inside. The dream lived. The first step had been taken.

The hours passed slowly in the dim dormitory, and just as Furg began to drift into an uneasy rest, the door creaked open and a stocky human with a bald head and stained apron stepped in holding a broom.

"You're the new one?" the man grunted.

Furg stood quickly. "Aye, I am."

"Good. Start earnin' your bread. Sweep the dorm floor top to bottom. Then come to the latrine. We're short on help, and the shit won't shovel itself."

He thrust the broom into Furg's hands and turned on his heel, muttering to himself. Furg looked around at the straw-covered floor and dust-heavy corners. He sighed and got to work, the broom scraping with dull resistance as he pushed dirt and straw into small piles.

Before long, two others joined him. One was tall and slender with sharp features—an elf with a clean but tired face. The other was a shorter, stockier dwarf with scruffy red hair and wide, curious eyes.

"Name's Reef," said the elf, grabbing a dustpan and helping without invitation.

"Tobi," the other dwarf said, wiping his nose. "Joined two weeks ago. Still ain't seen a sword up close that didn't have rust on it."

"I'm Furg," he said. "Just came in this morning."

The three worked in silence at first, then began talking—about home, about what brought them here, about how Ragarok was half drillmaster, half lunatic.

After the dorm floor was clean enough to eat off, they were marched out to the outhouse, handed small wooden shovels, and pointed to the ditch nearby.

"Make sure it's turned in good," Reef muttered, holding a cloth over his nose. "Ragarok says this helps build character. I think he just likes watching us gag."

"Should've stayed in the hills," Tobi grunted as he dumped another shovel of the foul compost.

With the worst behind them, they washed off and were ushered into the kitchen, where an older woman handed them a squawking chicken and a dull knife.

"Feathers off, guts out, clean cuts," she said briskly. "And if you botch it, I'm cooking *you*."

The three looked at each other. Reef rolled up his sleeves with practiced indifference, Tobi hesitated, and Furg took the knife. It wasn't pretty, but they got the job done. By the time the chicken was roasting and the sun dipped low outside, Furg's hands ached and his back screamed for rest.

That night, he curled into the hay-stuffed mattress. The blanket was thin, and the noises of the guild—groans, footsteps, a snoring human in a nearby room—kept sleep at bay. But exhaustion eventually took him.

Not long after, the trumpet blast of a horn jerked him awake. The first fingers of light were barely creeping through the dorm windows.

"Up, you rats!" Ragarok's voice boomed from the hallway. "Back yard in ten, unless you'd rather spend the day cleaning chamber pots!"

Still groggy, the three trudged out into the cold air, where the guild's backyard revealed itself as a rough patch of dirt ringed with stones and wooden posts. Bow targets leaned against the

back wall, half-splintered from use. At the center, a ring of white stones marked the sparring circle.

Ragarok stood waiting beside a crate of gear. He tossed each of them a wooden sword, battered and dulled from use, and a bent bucket with holes punched in the sides.

“Your helmets,” he said with a smirk. “Fine Dwarven steel—if you’re dumb enough to believe it.”

Each of them also got a circular wooden shield, roughly cut, more like a tray than anything else. Ragarok barked orders as they fumbled into position.

“Into the ring! All three of you! Show me what you know.”

They stepped in awkwardly, weapons raised. Furg swung first—too wide—and nearly lost his balance. Tobi lunged at Reef, who ducked by pure accident. The fight quickly devolved into clumsy flailing and grunts, until they all stood panting, bruised, and embarrassed.

Ragarok burst into laughter, holding his sides.

“By the gods, I’ve seen chickens fight with more coordination.”

He stepped into the ring, grabbing Furg’s wrist and raising it.

“You don’t swing like you’re chopping firewood! This isn’t a stump, it’s a man trying to kill you. Keep your elbow in—tight. Let the motion come from your hips, not your arms. You move like a sack of grain.”

He turned to Reef and barked, “You! You’ve got the reach but no grounding. Widen your stance. If your feet are too close, you’re easy to knock over. Fighting isn’t just hands and swords. It’s balance.”

Then to Tobi, he pointed at the shield. “That’s not a dinner plate, dwarf. Keep it close to your chest. Angle it to deflect, not absorb. And for the love of stone, don’t drop your guard after you swing. The blade only stops when the enemy does.”

He made them repeat movements—strike, parry, guard position. Again and again, until their arms burned and their brows were soaked in sweat.

Furg’s shoulders ached, but with each correction, he felt a little stronger, a little steadier. The clumsiness was still there, but Ragarok’s commands began to click into his muscles.

“Again!” the elf bellowed. “And this time, if any of you fall over your own feet, I’ll throw you in the latrine myself!”

Furg raised his wooden sword once more, helmet askew but eyes sharper now. The path ahead was long, and brutal, and filled with bruises. But for the first time since he’d stepped into town, he knew he had a chance to walk it.

The days bled into each other like ink into parchment, each one much the same as the last. Furg's muscles ached from dawn till dusk, his hands calloused and blistered, his forearms lined with shallow cuts and bruises that bloomed purple and yellow. The mornings always began with drills in the dirt yard, and the afternoons brought the real punishment—sparring sessions that left them stumbling and gasping for breath.

At first, it had been just wooden swords and bucklers, battered to splinters. But three weeks in, Ragarok arrived one morning holding a bundle wrapped in cloth. With a sharp flick, he revealed three steel swords, dull-edged but true. He held one aloft, then tossed it point-first into the ground.

“Congratulations,” he said. “You’re not completely useless. That means it’s time for you to bleed.”

Furg stepped forward first, taking the blade carefully into his hands. It was heavier than the wood, but balanced. Real. The moment it touched his grip, something stirred in him—nerves, excitement, fear. Tobi and Reef each took theirs with a quiet solemnity, exchanging glances that said *we’re really doing this now*.

From that day on, the bruises turned to cuts, mostly shallow—strikes that missed their angle, parries that came too late. Bandages became a regular part of their kit, and blood—be it theirs or someone else’s—was no longer a surprise.

Ragarok was relentless.

He stepped into the ring himself, now and again, to remind them how far they still had to go. When he did, it was never a lesson—it was a storm. He would launch forward with shield raised, slam into Furg's chest and knock the wind from him. He'd hook Tobi's legs with a twist of his boot and drop him into the dirt face-first. Reef, quick as he was, often found himself swatted down with the flat of Ragarok's blade or smacked across the helmet with a blow that rang like a bell.

One morning, after Reef had taken a particularly nasty shield bash and lay coughing on the ground, Ragarok loomed over them, sword planted like a banner.

“You think swordsmanship is about flashy swings and gritting your teeth?” he barked. “It’s not. It’s *precision*, it’s *timing*, it’s *patience*. You don’t fight to look good—you fight to survive.”

He paced as they stood, dirty, bloodied, and breathing hard.

“You want to win a fight? Remember this: The shield is your anchor. If it isn’t up, you’re dead. If your feet aren’t planted, you’re dead. If you swing before the opening, you’re dead. Sword in the right hand, shield in the left, eyes on the chest, not the blade. The chest doesn’t lie.”

Each day, they repeated drills until the motions were stitched into their muscle. Strike high, feint low. Shield punch. Step, twist, drive. Block and counter, deflect and pivot. Their

footwork improved, even if it left their calves burning. Furg learned to duck rather than block, to step inside an enemy's swing rather than flinch away. Reef's agility became sharper, more measured. Tobi, for all his bulk, learned to absorb blows with his shield and answer with a hammering counter.

Evenings, after washing the grime from their skin in cold water drawn from the pump, they'd sit in the dim reading hall by candlelight. Ragarok, surprisingly, enforced this with the same intensity as their training.

"You want to be warriors, you learn like one," he said. "You read. You think. You understand how to *fight*."

Furg squinted over a battered book called "*The Edge Between Blades*." It spoke of angles—how the arc of a sword mattered more than its speed. How a strike aimed at the shoulder could force a shield high, exposing the thigh. Another book, "*Hold Fast, Die Slow*," taught defensive philosophy. It emphasized body posture, shield stances, and breathing patterns—inhale before blocking, exhale during a counter.

A parchment scroll Reef found in a drawer was filled with stick-figure diagrams of disarming techniques and close-quarter movements: locking an enemy's elbow with a shield edge, twisting the hips to throw off balance, using the crossguard to bind an opposing blade.

They absorbed what they could, tested it in the yard the next morning, failed, adjusted, and improved.

By the end of the first month, the change was clear. They no longer stumbled into the ring like scared recruits—they entered with weight in their steps, blades held higher, and eyes that watched for opportunity. The bruises still came, and so did the pain, but so did the moments of triumph: a perfect block, a counter landed, a feint that fooled even Ragarok.

Their chores had lessened—just a few hours each morning and evening. Furg still helped haul water or sweep the hall, but now most of his days were sword and shield, sweat and blood. He shared quiet meals with Tobi and Reef, a brotherhood forming not through words but through hardship.

One night, as they sat under the stars just outside the dorms, Reef spoke without looking over.

"Think we'll ever be good enough for a real job?"

Tobi chuckled. "We're not dead yet. That's a start."

Furg grinned through his bruises. "Give it another month. Maybe I'll even hit Ragarok back."

From the training hall window, the faint sound of steel clashing against steel rang out into the night.

The months passed in a blur of sweat, steel, and pain. Furg's body had hardened, his strikes faster, footwork surer, and his shield now moved as if it was part of his arm. Tobi and Reef had come into their own as well—Tobi with sheer resilience and grit, and Reef with speed and ruthless cunning. Each day was a grindstone, and each night they collapsed into their straw mattresses feeling more like fighters than ever before.

Then, one morning, everything changed.

Ragarok burst into the dorms before the sun had risen, his voice sharp as a blade.

“Up, you dogs! Blades and buckets—now! No food, no water. Move it!”

Furg, Tobi, and Reef scrambled from their beds, grabbing their gear. They threw on their dented bucket-helmets and strapped on wooden shields, the edges gnawed and worn from weeks of punishment. Their swords hung at their sides—real steel, dulled only at the tip.

Ragarok didn't say a word as he led them through the gates of the city, down winding paths that cut through thick brush and gnarled roots. The morning mist clung to the trees, the air damp and expectant. They followed him into a grove, where a clearing opened in the trees, ringed by moss-covered stones.

“Sit,” Ragarok said. “Wait here.”

He turned, walked several paces, and then—without warning—let out a sharp, high-pitched whistle.

Then he ran.

The three looked at each other, stunned.

“What in the hells was that?” Reef muttered, standing and turning in a slow circle.

Furg adjusted his helmet. “A test. Has to be.”

Tobi gripped his sword tighter. “Don't like the look of this.”

The forest was silent for a moment—then the underbrush rustled, fast and sharp. Two goblins burst from the trees, snarling and wild-eyed, clutching crude blades and charging straight for them.

Furg barely had time to raise his shield before the first goblin slammed into him. The force knocked him backward, and his foot caught on a root. He fell hard, the goblin on top of him, its blade plunging into his side. A hot, sharp pain seared his stomach and his vision went white. He gasped—and passed out.

Tobi roared and swung at the second goblin, catching its side but leaving himself open. The goblin howled and slashed low, the blade tearing deep into Tobi's thigh. He dropped to one knee, blood pouring down his leg.

Reef managed to sidestep a jab, stabbing forward and grazing one goblin's shoulder. It retaliated with a vicious punch to his face. The helmet twisted sideways. Then came a boot to his head—crack. The sound was dull and deep, and Reef fell backward, nose bleeding, barely conscious.

The goblins circled the downed group, grinning and snarling, ready to finish them.

But Furg's eyes fluttered open.

He coughed, tasting iron in his mouth. Pain screamed in his stomach, but something deeper roared louder—rage, will, memory. He rolled sideways, grabbed his sword with bloody fingers, and stood with a groan.

The goblin turned, surprised.

Furg screamed and lunged, burying his sword in the creature's neck. Hot blood sprayed his face, warm and sickening. The goblin gurgled, thrashed, then went limp.

Reef, wheezing, grabbed his sword with a shaking hand and drove it into the second goblin's arm. The steel hit bone and got stuck in it. The goblin shrieked, slashing blindly, just as Tobi, limping and blood-soaked, screamed and hurled himself forward.

With a two-handed thrust, he buried his sword in the goblin's chest.

It jerked once, then fell.

Silence.

The three of them collapsed into the bloodstained grass, panting, staring at the sky above. They lay there for an hour, saying nothing, just breathing, bruised and broken. When finally they could move again, they dragged themselves upright and limped toward the city.

Back at the guild, they stumbled into the hall and found Ragarok in his office, sitting with his feet up on the table, nursing a tankard of dark ale.

"Well," he said, without looking up, "you pieces of shit actually came back."

He finally raised his eyes, noting the blood, the limp in Tobi's leg, Reef's swollen face, and the hole torn in Furg's shirt.

"Hmph. Seems you maggots ain't so useless after all."

He raised the mug, drained it in one long gulp, and let out a thunderous belch that filled the room with a stench of yeast and bitterness.

"Still ugly as trolls though."

The three said nothing. They just stood there, trembling, bloody, and exhausted.

"Back room's got bandages and stew. Go patch yourselves up. We train again in two days."

They limped off, half-dead, and collapsed onto the benches in the back room. Reef clutched a wet cloth to his face, Tobi bound his leg with a strip of linen, and Furg sat quietly, tying his wound and staring at the dried blood on his sword.

“Next time,” Tobi groaned, “he better bring three goblins. That was barely fair.”

Reef chuckled, then winced. “Can’t believe we survived.”

Furg didn’t speak, just looked down at his side where the wound throbbed beneath the bandage.

But inside, something had changed.

He had bled. He had fought. He had survived.

The passing months were a storm of bruises and discipline, with Ragarok at the eye of it all, relentless and merciless. The sparring rings were filled not just with blades and sweat now, but with grunts of pain and the dull thud of bodies hitting the walls. Ragarok had grown harsher, more unpredictable—smashing them into pillars mid-drill, kicking them in the gut without warning, hurling shields at their heads as they walked past.

“Your enemy won’t wait for you to be ready,” he growled once after knocking Furg flat with a shoulder charge. “If you don’t stay alert, you’ll be a corpse with good posture.”

Still, through pain and bruises, they improved. They moved faster, struck harder, thought quicker. The beatings sharpened their senses like whetstones on steel.

Then, one morning as the sun painted the courtyard gold, Ragarok called them to the training ring.

“You three,” he said, arms folded, “have finally become something resembling fighters. Barely.”

He tossed a sealed parchment to Reef, who caught it mid-air.

“You’ve got your first job. Nothing glorious. Take that to the guild contact in Mulhak. Wooden house with an iron knocker. You get one gold each when the job’s done.”

“One gold?” Tobi asked, eyeing the parchment like it should be heavier.

“It’s not the pay,” Ragarok said. “It’s the road. Now move your asses before I rethink this.”

By dawn, the three were walking out the eastern gate of Azir, cloaks drawn tight against the breeze. The sun hung low in the sky, casting long shadows over the road that stretched through gentle hills and copses of young trees.

After a while, they heard light footsteps and spotted a lone traveler—a female elf with braided auburn hair and a wide pack on her back. She raised a hand as she approached.

“Water,” she said softly, voice dry. “Do you have any to spare?”

Furg nodded and unslung his waterskin, passing it to her.

She drank gratefully. “Thank you, kind sirs. Safe roads.”

They watched her vanish behind them down the road, and then moved on.

Reef began whistling a playful tune, his steps lighter now. The day had turned pleasant—the sky a lazy blue, the breeze cool, the fields whispering in the wind. An hour in, they rested by a mossy outcrop beneath a cluster of willows.

Tobi sat down hard with a sigh. “Bread and water. The classic.”

They passed around the simple meal, tearing pieces of bread and drinking in turns.

“Not bad,” Reef said, chewing, “but I still miss fried squirrel.”

Furg leaned back on his elbows, staring at the sky. “Life in the city’s not so bad though. Once you get through the muck. Back home it was the same thing every day—field, woodpile, livestock. Here... there’s more.”

Tobi nodded, stretching his leg. “More chance. More coin. More trouble.”

“Trouble’s what we’re trained for now,” Furg said. “And a city pays more than a village ever could.”

As they rested, a line of carts clattered past them, mules braying, merchants shouting half-heard arguments to each other. The carts were laden with sacks of grain and crates of tools, bound for the markets of Mulhak.

Not long after, they reached the edge of the town itself. Tukar was smaller than Azir, but alive with noise and color. Narrow stone streets twisted between squat wooden houses with painted shutters. Children ran barefoot through alleys, and shopkeepers called out to passersby. The air smelled of fresh-baked loaves, manure, and dye pots. Musicians played near a fountain, and the clang of a smith’s hammer echoed from a forge nearby.

“Cozy place,” Reef muttered. “Not as tight-walled as Azir.”

“Still smells like feet,” Tobi added.

They spent nearly an hour searching the crooked streets, asking for directions, getting contradictory answers. Finally, they found the house—weathered timber, iron knocker shaped like a lion’s mouth.

Reef knocked. After a pause, the door cracked open to reveal an old man with a bent nose and wild eyebrows.

“Eh?” he grumbled.

“We’ve got a message from Murkar’s Fighters,” Reef said, holding out the sealed parchment.

The old man snatched it, tore the seal with his thumbnail, skimmed the contents, then grunted. He turned back into the house, reappeared with three grimy gold coins, and shoved them into Reef's hand.

"Now bugger off," he muttered and slammed the door.

The three stood there for a moment, blinking.

"Well," Furg said, "I guess that's success."

They wandered the streets afterward, curious and relaxed for the first time in months. Street vendors sold roasted nuts, sweet rolls, and boiled sausages. Lanterns hung from balconies, and dogs barked from within the houses. Fishermen hauled nets by a nearby canal, and a few armed patrols in rusted chainmail passed by without giving them more than a glance.

"We did it," Tobi said at last.

"One gold," Reef smirked. "Hard-earned riches."

Furg looked out across the market square, a weight in his bones that hadn't been there before. "First job's done," he said. "Let's not make it the last."

The three of them stood a little taller that day. For the first time, they weren't just trainees.

They were on the road.

The narrow alleys of Tukur twisted like a serpent's coils, pulling the trio deeper into the backstreets as the sunlight dimmed behind leaning rooftops. Furg walked ahead, still feeling the weight of four gold coins in his pouch—a small fortune to a boy who once chopped firewood for copper bits. Tobi followed close, whistling low through his teeth, while Reef trailed behind, examining the etched pattern of his new belt buckle, a trinket he'd bartered with his single coin.

They turned a corner and found themselves at a dead end—a wall of crumbling brick, overgrown with ivy and shadowed by tall buildings. Furg stopped short.

"Well, that's the wrong way," Tobi muttered.

Before they could turn around, footsteps echoed behind them. A man stepped into the alley's mouth, lean and broad-shouldered, a jagged scar across his temple and a dagger glinting in his hand.

"Evening, gentlemen," he said smoothly. "Hand over the coin. No need to bleed if you do it quick."

Reef tensed. "Not happening."

Furg's hand found his sword hilt, eyes locking with the stranger's. "We earned this."

The man sneered. "And I'll earn it now."

He lunged first, but the party was ready. Tobi swung wide and forced the man back for a heartbeat, giving Reef the opening to strike. The robber ducked low and swept Reef's legs out, driving a fist into his jaw as he fell. Reef hit the cobbles with a crunch and went limp.

"Reef!" Furg shouted, then surged forward in a full-body leap.

He crashed into the man's midsection, knocking the wind from his lungs. The robber staggered back, gasping. Furg didn't wait—he raised his sword with both hands and brought it down hard. The edge struck just above the man's collarbone with a sickening crack. The bandit gurgled and dropped, twitching once before stillness claimed him.

Tobi knelt beside Reef. "Unconscious, but breathin'."

Furg, trembling, pulled the robber's pouch free—ten gold coins clinked inside. He handed three to Tobi, kept four, and tucked the last three into Reef's pocket.

"More gold than I've ever had," Furg said, still catching his breath. "But it doesn't feel like it used to."

He took the robber's dagger, a curved thing with a leather-wrapped hilt, and slipped it into his belt.

They turned to leave, helping Reef up between them, but barely made it out of the alley before two more figures stepped into their path. Both were armed—one with a short sword, the other with a club wrapped in iron nails.

"You killed Jarn," one of them spat. "We're gonna flay you for that."

Furg stepped forward, voice firm. "He pulled a blade on us. He died for it."

"No talk," said the other. "Just blood."

They charged.

Reef pushed himself upright, staggered forward to meet the club-wielder, but the man was fast and brutal. A crushing blow caught Reef across the side of the head before he could lift his blade. His eyes went wide—and then he collapsed, unmoving, blood pooling beneath him.

"Reef!" Tobi shouted in horror.

Furg didn't look—he couldn't. Rage surged through him as he parried a strike and countered, his blade slicing open the attacker's side. The man screamed and stumbled. Furg didn't stop. He drove his sword deep into the man's chest, blood soaking his arms.

Tobi howled and charged the other, ducking a wild swing and driving his sword under the man's ribs. The bandit gasped, jerked, then slumped against the wall.

The silence afterward was deafening.

Furg knelt beside Reef, but it was no use. His friend's skull had caved under the blow, his breath gone. He took 3 gold coins off him.

Tobi dropped to his knees, pressing his face into his hands. "He was just a lad like us..."

Furg stared blankly ahead. "We have to go. This city's rot. We stay, we die too."

They stood in silence, grief written in every movement.

With heavy steps, they left Tukar behind. The sun was sinking now, red and wide over the hills, casting long shadows behind them as they walked the road back to Azir—two where once there were three.

Neither spoke for a long while.

But in Furg's belt, the dagger hung like a reminder.

And in his heart, the weight of coin and death had become one.

The return to Azir was a quiet, heavy march. Furg and Tobi said little as the city's familiar stone walls came into view, the sky grey with early evening clouds. Their steps felt leaden as they approached the iron-bound doors of the guild.

Inside, Ragarok sat at his usual place near the hearth, oiling a blade, his brow furrowed. He looked up as they entered, eyes flicking from one face to the other—and then narrowing when he realized one was missing.

"Where's Reef?" he asked bluntly.

Tobi swallowed. "Dead. Tukar alleys. Three bandits."

Furg's voice was low. "Didn't make it. We—couldn't carry him back."

Ragarok stood, slamming the blade onto the table. "Damn you both."

They flinched.

"You leave a brother behind, eh? Unless the place is burning or crawling with orcs, we *don't* leave our own. You hear me? We bury them with steel and silence, not let the rats chew their bones in some piss-soaked alley!"

Furg opened his mouth, then shut it. There was nothing he could say.

Ragarok pointed toward the stable. "Take the mule. Get back there. Bring his body. Now."

The road back to Tukar felt longer, darker. A grey drizzle misted the air by the time they arrived. Reef's body was where they'd left it, mercifully undisturbed. They wrapped him in a cloth they'd brought, laid him carefully in the wagon, and turned back toward Azir.

By nightfall they were behind the guild. Ragarok stood with arms crossed, a shovel leaning against his shoulder.

“No ceremonies,” he muttered. “He was one of us. That’s enough.”

He handed them the shovels.

Furg and Tobi dug in silence. The soil was tough and clumped with roots, but neither complained. When the ditch was deep enough, they lowered Reef’s body in. No words were spoken. They simply shoveled dirt over him until the earth lay flat again, damp and dark.

No stone. No name. Just silence.

The next morning, Ragarok handed them a pouch of ten gold coins.

“Time for something lighter. Go to the Vicious Mole. We need four barrels of the dark stuff. The kind that makes your tongue hate you. Don’t come back with anything less.”

Furg and Tobi hitched the mule to the wagon again and set off through Azir’s winding streets. The Vicious Mole sat crooked on a corner between a tannery and a dice hall, its wooden sign depicting a mole in a leather vest swinging a mug half his size.

Inside, the air was thick with pipe smoke, roast meat, and stale ale. A burly man with a braided beard and a scar across his nose stood behind the bar, wiping mugs. His apron was soaked with years of spilled drink.

“Sakold?” Furg asked.

“That’s what my mother screamed, aye,” the man said, grinning. “What can I pour for you lads?”

“We’re here for ale,” Tobi said. “From Murkar’s Fighters.”

Sakold nodded knowingly. “Ah, Ragarok’s poison. Four barrels of the dark swill, eh?”

He shuffled to the back and returned moments later, overseeing the barrels being rolled out by two stablehands. As they loaded the wagon, Sakold leaned on the railing and scratched his beard with satisfaction.

“Mole’s ale,” he said, chuckling, “flows like down the deer’s holes.”

Furg and Tobi looked at each other, then back at him, utterly lost.

“...What does that even mean?” Furg muttered under his breath.

Tobi shrugged. “City sayings. Don’t think too hard.”

They returned to the guild with the barrels bouncing in the wagon bed. The guards nodded as they passed, and even one of the older guildmembers gave them a grunt of acknowledgment.

Inside, the kitchen was warm with the scent of spiced chicken and buttery potatoes. They were handed wooden plates piled with food—more than usual—and tin mugs with a splash of dark ale foaming at the rim.

Ragarok raised his own mug as they sat.

“Well, at least you can carry a barrel without tripping over yourselves.”

He took a long swig, wiped his mouth, and gave them a nod.

“You’ll live.”

Furg sat with his plate, taking a bite of the roasted chicken. It was warm, filling, real. The ale burned slightly, but it carried a sweetness that surprised him. Tobi grinned beside him, mouth full of potatoes.

For a moment, the world was still, and the silence around Reef’s missing place at the table was filled—not with forgetfulness—but with memory.

The days after the ale run passed quickly, and the air in the guild shifted. Word spread that new blood was coming—fighters from the northern routes, more seasoned than the usual scrappy recruits. When they arrived, all eyes in the guildyard turned to them.

Marg was a tall, broad-shouldered woman with cropped black hair and a scar that ran across her jaw. Her armor bore nicks and dried blood in the seams. She carried her longsword like it was part of her spine. Beside her was Um, a thick-limbed man with quiet eyes and a great curved blade slung across his back, the sort that only serious men carried. Both of them moved with the unbothered calm of those who had bled more than they spoke of.



Ragarok wasted no time.

“Marg. Um. These two”—he gestured at Furg and Tobi—“need to know what pain tastes like. Put ‘em through it.”

The first sparring session was humbling. Marg knocked Tobi flat with a spinning backhand that split his lip open, and Um’s technique was so precise Furg could barely follow the strikes, much less block them. But each day, they were matched again. Ragarok barked orders from the side of the ring while the clash of real steel rang in the yard.

Furg’s movements began to change. He stopped swinging from the shoulders and started feeling the weight of the blade from the hips. He learned to shift his footing not just to dodge but to gain advantage. He could see the fight as a rhythm now—when to press, when to fall back. Marg gave him a nod after one session where he landed a clean strike to her thigh.

“You’re getting dangerous, dwarf,” she said, wiping sweat from her brow.

It was that evening that Furg made his decision. He’d been carrying the coins for weeks now—eight gold pieces, counting the three he’d quietly taken from Reef’s pouch. He hadn’t told Tobi. It didn’t feel like stealing. Reef would’ve understood.

The armor shop sat just off Azir’s market square, half hidden between a candle-maker and a fishmonger. Furg stepped inside to the smell of tanned leather and oiled buckles.

The armorer, a lanky half-elf with silver-threaded hair, looked up. “Need something tough or something shiny?”

“Something that works,” Furg said, placing five gold coins on the counter.

In return, he was handed a set of supple brown leather armor with reinforced shoulders and thick laces at the side. It fit snug, close to the body without restricting movement. Furg tried it on, tested the stretch in his arms, rolled his shoulders. It felt like stepping into a new skin.

He glanced over to the weapons wall before he left. A short sword hung behind the counter—sturdy, straight blade, well-balanced. Eight gold. And beside it, a heavy round shield with a brass rim—ten gold.

Someday, he thought. Soon.

Returning to the guild with the new armor strapped on, Furg walked taller. Tobi clapped him on the back with a grin when he saw it.

“Looks good. Better than those rags we wear.”

Furg chuckled. “Not as good as that coat you patched with boiled cabbage leaves last week.”

Tobi looked down at his torn shirt and scuffed boots. “One day, I’ll have armor that squeaks when I walk. Shiny, black steel, helmet with a nose guard.”

“You planning to pay for it with dreams?”

“No,” Tobi said, jaw tightening. “With blood.”

They stepped into the yard together, where Marg and Um were already waiting, blades in hand. Ragarok leaned on the wall, arms crossed.

“Armor or not,” he called out, “you’re still meat until you learn to move like steel.”

Furg grinned and stepped into the ring, the leather creaking gently as he raised his blade.

He was no longer just a villager with strong arms and a hungry dream.

He was becoming a fighter.

The Bandits

The dawn sky over Azir was pale with mist as the four fighters gathered in the guild yard, blades sheathed, gear packed. Ragarok stood before them, arms folded, expression grim.

“Trade route north’s been hit twice in the last week,” he said. “Merchants say five of ’em, maybe more, wearing mismatched gear, striking fast and vanishin’ into the trees. You four find them. You end them. No survivors.”

He looked each of them in the eye.

“This ain’t training. This is real. You’re not pulling punches, and neither will they.”

They nodded.

By first light they were riding out of Azir, mule and supplies left behind—they needed speed, not burden. The trade road stretched through sparse trees and dry grass, the sun climbing higher as they scanned the ground.

An hour into the trek, Um dropped to one knee, touching the packed dirt where the trail split. “Tracks,” he said, motioning with two fingers. “Five sets. Fresh.”

They followed the trail off-road, where the earth turned soft and muddy. Tobi crouched beside a puddle and pointed. “See that? Deep heel prints. They were moving slow here—probably carrying gear.”

Past the mud, the ground grew thick with pine needles. Furg spotted a patch where the hay-like brush had been crushed flat.

“They slept here,” he muttered.

The tracks veered toward a grove of twisted oaks and thick underbrush. The air changed—cooler, shaded, quiet. The scent of pine and smoke drifted faintly through the trees.

Then, ahead through the trunks, firelight flickered.

The party dropped to their knees and crept forward.

Between the trees, in a small clearing, five rough-looking men lounged around a crackling fire. They were armored in a patchwork of stolen gear—leather jerkins, rusted mail, one with a red scarf tied around his forehead. A pair of skewered squirrels roasted over the flames. One of the bandits passed around a skin of cheap wine while another chewed loudly.

Furg leaned close to the others. “I’ve got an idea.”

He picked up a smooth rock from the forest floor and, taking careful aim, hurled it with a grunt. The stone cracked against the helmet of the bandit closest to the fire. The clank rang out across the grove.

“What the—?” the bandit snarled, standing and rubbing his head, eyes scanning the shadows.

“Wind must’ve dropped something,” another muttered. “You’re jumpy.”

Furg, Tobi, Um, and Marg inched forward until only the trunks separated them from the firelight. Um raised his fist, then dropped it in one sharp motion.

They burst from cover.

Marg was the fastest. She charged the nearest bandit as he fumbled for his sword and slammed her blade under his ribs before he could draw. He gurgled and dropped, blood pooling in the dirt.

Tobi swung wide at a lanky man scrambling to his feet. The bandit parried, barely, and kicked out, catching Tobi’s thigh—but Furg came from behind and slashed his shoulder, turning the man’s cry into a shriek.

“Two behind us!” Um shouted, raising his curved blade to meet a charging foe.

One bandit lunged for Marg, swinging wildly. She ducked under his strike and drove her shoulder into his chest, knocking him back, then hammered her pommel into his jaw. He collapsed in a heap.

Furg found himself locked with the bandit he’d wounded, blades locked, faces inches apart. The man stank of sweat and wine.

“You little rat—” the bandit hissed.

Furg shoved forward with all his strength, breaking the lock, then ducked low and swung upward. His sword tore through the man’s thigh and he fell screaming. Furg ended it with a second strike to the chest.

Meanwhile, Um parried a blow with one arm and slashed the attacker’s leg with a clean, practiced sweep. The bandit stumbled, and Um stepped in, twisting his blade and shoving it up under the man’s chin. Blood sprayed, hot and fast.

The last bandit turned to run—but Tobi, bloodied and limping, hurled his sword like a spear. It struck the man’s back with a brutal thud, dropping him like a sack of meat.

The clearing fell silent, broken only by the crackle of fire and the harsh, ragged breathing of the fighters.

“Everyone alive?” Marg called.

Furg wiped blood from his face. “Still breathing.”

Tobi sat down heavily, pressing a hand to his leg. “Tore something. Bastard got me good.”

Um was already checking the bodies. “Five bandits. This is the group.”

They piled the weapons, gathered anything of value—some coin, a silver ring, a map with scrawled notes—and kicked dirt over the fire. The squirrels had fallen into the flames.

Marg nudged one with her boot. “Shame. Smelled decent.”

Furg glanced at the bloodied ground, then at his sword. It was the first time he’d killed a man who hadn’t struck first. There was no glory in it—just exhaustion.

“Let’s get back,” he muttered.

The job was done. The road was calling again.

The sun was beginning to dip behind the treetops, casting long shadows over the grove as the blood-soaked party trudged back toward Azir. Crows circled lazily above, drawn by the scent of death, while flies buzzed in tight clouds around the gore left in the bandits’ camp. Furg led the way, sword crusted in half-dried blood, boots slick with muck. Tobi limped beside him, his torn leg bound in dirty linen.

Marg and Um walked ahead, their armor silent, blades resting on their backs but never far from reach.

Then, without warning, the ground groaned beneath their feet.

There was a dull crunch—like dried ribs snapping under weight—then the soil collapsed. Marg’s scream was sharp and sudden. Um gave a low grunt, and then they were gone.

Furg and Tobi halted just in time, dust spraying across their boots. Before them yawned a pit nearly ten meters deep, jagged at the edges, like the earth had been torn from within. Below, shadows danced in unnatural angles. There was no bottom at first glance, just blackness.

“Shit,” Furg breathed, kneeling. “They fell straight through.”

Tobi peered over, his knuckles white around his hilt. “I didn’t even see it... like it opened just for them.”

Furg stood and looked around. “There’s got to be a way down. This was a tunnel, not a sinkhole.”

They circled the grove until they found a narrow crevice, half hidden behind a leaning elm. A jagged hole opened into the side of a rocky rise, its entrance stained with streaks of moss and rot. The air seeping out was cold, too cold for early autumn, and carried the sour tang of turned soil and old bones.

They lit a torch from the remains of the bandits' fire and stepped inside.

The tunnel twisted like a broken gut, the walls damp and pulsing slightly with unseen veins just beneath the rock. Roots hung like strands of hair from above, brushing their helmets and clinging to their cloaks. The floor sloped downward, slick with black moss and puddles of stagnant water. Every breath echoed, and the silence between drips and steps was worse than any sound.

Then the whispers began.

Low. Faint. Like someone murmuring just behind their ears, in a tongue neither of them recognized.

Furg stopped. "Do you hear that?"

Tobi nodded. "It's... it's like someone praying. Or crying. Or both."

They rounded a bend—and there it was.

The Gravetongue Worm slithered from a fissure in the wall, dragging itself forward on folds of translucent flesh. The thing was the size of a dog, its veiny, pallid skin twitching as if trying to mimic breath. Its face, if one could call it that, was an eyeless mass split down the middle by a jagged black tongue that split again at the tip like a serpent's. The tongue trembled and writhed, whispering in broken voices, a collage of the dead.

Furg's skin crawled. He could feel its hunger—not for blood, but for *remains*. For *memory*. The thing wanted his *past*.

With a sudden lurch, the worm launched itself toward them.

Furg swung his torch just in time, the flame catching the worm's side, but it rolled with unnatural grace and slammed into Tobi's legs. Its barbed tongue lashed out and stabbed into his calf—Tobi screamed, dropping to one knee as blood sprayed across the stones.

"Get it off me!" he howled.

Furg charged, sword raised. He drove the blade into the worm's back, but it twisted and convulsed, the flesh parting like wet paper. The tongue lashed out again, grazing Furg's arm, cutting a thin line that burned like poison. For a moment, he *heard* something—not a sound, but a *memory* not his own. A woman weeping. A child dying of fever. Smoke. A battlefield.

He roared and struck again, hacking downward.



This time, the blade connected with the base of the worm's mass. A burst of black fluid erupted, thick and hot, stinking of bile and rotted teeth. The worm screeched—dozens of dead voices layered together—and flailed, knocking the torch aside and plunging them into flickering shadow.

Tobi, gritting his teeth through the pain, pulled his dagger and stabbed wildly at the coiling form. It spasmed, shrieking once more, and tried to retreat into the wall.

Furg didn't let it.

He slammed his boot onto the worm's upper half, pinning it to the stone, and drove his blade straight through the top of its head. The tongue split one final time, twitching blindly, then went still. The whispering ceased.

Only the sound of their ragged breathing remained.

Furg leaned back, slick with gore. "Gods... what *was* that?"

Tobi sat against the wall, face pale. "I think it showed me my grandmother. She died ten years ago. I felt her fingers on my face."

They stayed like that for a moment, panting, until a voice echoed faintly down the tunnel—Um, calling out, hoarse but alive.

Furg grabbed the torch and helped Tobi to his feet.

"Come on," he said. "Let's find the others. This place is breathing."

And deep below the grove, in tunnels older than any map, the earth whispered still.

The air in the tunnel had grown sick with moisture, thick as a tongue pressed to the throat. Furg and Tobi moved carefully, torchlight flickering against walls slick with a sheen of moss and filth. Every few steps, one of them would pause, heart jolting at the sound of Marg's or Um's voice—but the cries were distant, warped, always just out of reach.

"Marg!" Tobi shouted down one corridor, only to hear his own voice crawl back at him, distorted and dripping with static.

"We've passed that same skull-shaped root three times," Furg muttered. "This place loops. It's alive, or cursed, or both."

They took another left, then right, then two more turns. The darkness seemed to press tighter, like the walls were narrowing. Finally, they emerged into a larger chamber—round, low-ceilinged, the floor sunken and wet. A shallow pool shimmered dully, rippling with every breath they took.

Two *Mirecoils* slithered at the far end of the chamber, their bodies long and bloated like bloated slugs swollen with death. The things dragged themselves in slow, obscene undulations, their semi-transparent flesh pulsing with twitching veins and swirling internal sludge. Their mouths were nightmares—round, lamprey-like voids ringed with cartilage that rasped in wet anticipation. From their trails oozed a fluorescent slick, a bubbling, bone-dissolving slime that hissed when it touched the stone.

Furg whispered, "Gods... they're feeding."

One of the creatures turned toward the sound, and the other soon followed, drawn to the tremble of blood, breath, and trauma. The *Mirecoils* let out no screech, no roar—just a sound like churning intestines and wet stone grinding beneath a tomb.

"Ready your blade," Furg growled. "We fight or we rot."

The first *Mirecoil* lunged—not fast, but sudden, like a collapsing lung. Its entire mass surged forward in one nauseating thrust, and its grinding mouth snapped at Tobi's leg. Tobi jumped back, but his boot skidded through the creature's slime. He slipped, crashing to the ground as his sword clattered.

Furg didn't wait. He charged, blade raised, and drove it down into the thick hide. The steel sank half an inch before catching on dense cartilage. The *Mirecoil* convulsed violently, whipping its tail and flinging Furg back into the wall. He coughed as slime burned against his chest, the armor beginning to smoke where it touched.

The second *Mirecoil* coiled, then launched. It slammed into Tobi's side, pinning him, its grinding mouth rasping along his leather jerkin. Sparks flew as the cartilage tore across metal. Tobi screamed and drove his dagger up—jamming it just beneath what might pass for the thing's head.

It writhed and spasmed, spraying slime. Furg rose again, spitting blood, and lunged at the first worm. This time, he aimed for the side. He drove the blade between two folds of flesh, twisting. With a sudden, grotesque *pop*, the creature split, spilling rancid, black bile that sizzled as it hit the stone. The smell was overwhelming—like soured blood and curdled milk boiling in a corpse.



Tobi kicked the second Mirecoil away, scrambled up, and together they attacked. Furg hacked while Tobi circled, baiting the thing with shouted curses and shallow strikes. It lunged at Furg—and Tobi leapt, plunging his sword deep into the top of its body. The blade vanished to the hilt, and when he yanked it free, a fountain of infected gore spewed forth.

The worm twitched once... then melted into itself, its skin sloughing like wet parchment.

The chamber went quiet.

No echoes. No wind. Just the distant, endless drip of rot.

Both men collapsed against the wall, shaking, hands slick with death. Tobi pulled out one of the few healing vials they had left—a murky red concoction sealed in wax—and passed it to Furg.

Furg drank, grimacing as it burned down his throat. His wounds sealed slightly, aches easing.

Tobi followed, coughing. “That was... not a fight. That was digestion in progress.”

“We were almost *prey*,” Furg spat. “If I die in these tunnels, it’s not going to be inside something that squishes.”

They stood again, still sore, still soaked in reeking slime, and pressed forward—deeper into the foul lungs of the earth, where their comrades’ voices still called and the dead things never stopped whispering.

The tunnel ahead bent sharply, and Furg slowed, torchlight shivering along the curved stone. Tobi followed close, both of them still bearing the stench of Mirecoil gore, the sticky film clinging to their armor like second skin. The silence was deeper here, suffocating, until it cracked with a sudden noise—thin and sharp, like claws dragging over stone.

Then came the squeaking.

High-pitched, chaotic, a dozen mouths babbling in breathless excitement.

Out of the dark they came—six Dregsnitches, crawling from side tunnels and cracks in the wall. Human-sized, hunched, hairless things that skittered like oversized rats, their skin yellowed and flaking, eyes tiny and sunken deep into sockets. Their limbs were long and bent wrong, fingers like fishhooks, mouths torn into permanent sneers with black, rotted teeth.



One wore a dented helm too big for its head. Another dragged a snapped chair leg as a club. They circled the party with fast, twitching motions, chattering in some gibbering tongue that made Furg’s stomach churn.

“Back to back!” Furg barked, raising his blade.

Tobi stepped close. “They’re surrounding—”

One leapt.

It slammed into Furg's chest, its claws raking across his face. He screamed as teeth tore into his cheek, warm blood spilling into his mouth. He threw it off with a wild shout and hacked down, cleaving its head at an angle. The body twitched, gurgled, then went still.

Tobi wasn't so lucky. Two Dregsnitches had him down, one clawing his back, the other biting into the side of his face, its breath like a plague-ridden corpse. Tobi roared and smashed the creature's head against the wall once, twice—bone cracked, blood splattered. He turned, sword flashing, and opened the second from groin to sternum, black blood dumping onto the stones.

Another charged from the side—Furg spun and impaled it mid-lunge, his blade sliding through its ribs and out the back. A fourth leapt toward his legs, biting into his calf. He screamed and kicked it off, then brought his boot down on its skull until it cracked like wet wood.

Tobi staggered toward the last two, slashing one across the chest, spinning to drive his blade through the other's spine. Both fell in wet, jerking convulsions, and then—all was quiet again, save their panting and the slow drip of blood onto stone.

Furg leaned against the wall, one hand pressed to his bleeding cheek. "By the gods... my face—he took a chunk."

Tobi wiped blood from his mouth, his eye swelling shut. "I'll take a scar over ending up as rat shit."

They drank what remained of their healing potion, dulling the pain but not sealing the damage fully. Furg's cheek throbbed, and Tobi's eye was still leaking blood, but they could stand. They could walk.

Ahead, the tunnel split into five mouths—narrow, hungry veins vanishing into the dark.

"Listen," Furg said, holding his breath.

From the middle-left tunnel came a voice, faint and echoing, but real.

"Help... someone—there?"

"That's Um!" Tobi hissed.

Without another word, they descended into the leftward path.

The corridor twisted down into damp air and gloom, but after a time they entered a rounded chamber—its walls reinforced with old beams, roots grown between the cracks. There, sitting against the far wall, were Marg and Um. Marg had blood on her face and sword in her lap. Um clutched his leg, which bent at an unnatural angle.

"About damn time," Marg muttered, standing quickly. "We've been shouting for hours."

"We were fighting things," Furg said. "Worms. Dregsnitches. Mirecoils. You name it."

Um grimaced. “I fell onto a pile of rusted spikes. Leg’s no good.”

“Can you stand?” Tobi asked, moving to help.

“With help,” Um nodded. “But we need to get *out* of this tomb.”

Furg slung Um’s arm over his shoulder, and the four of them, wounded but alive, pressed back into the winding tunnels.

“We follow the warm air,” Marg said. “Down here, that’s the only thing still honest.”

So they walked—limping, bleeding, blades still drawn—through the gut of the underworld, seeking a crack in the dark wide enough to escape.

The tunnels had grown narrower again, slick with damp and choked with the reek of mold. The air felt alive—thick, humid, laced with something sweet and wrong. Furg’s skin prickled as they advanced, torchlight casting twitching shadows across the moss-furred walls. Every breath tasted of rot and mushrooms.

Then the noise came.

Not footsteps—*shuffling*. A sound like wet flesh dragging over stone, punctuated by sick, gasping exhalations. And then they saw them.

Sixteen shapes emerged from the dark—*Sporewretches*, half-men, half-rotted husks, their skin torn and covered in pulsing fungal blooms. Caps burst from their eyes, chests split open by cords of spore-root. Some had arms elongated into bark-like clubs, others no faces at all—just dripping stalks where mouths once screamed.

Furg’s torch flickered. “What in all seven hells...”

Marg whispered, “Sporewretches. Burned two once. Didn’t scream. Didn’t even *bleed*. Just puffed spores and grinned.”

The creatures advanced.

“Damn this,” Tobi growled. “*Damn* all of this!”

The first Sporewretch lunged—and the tunnel exploded into chaos.

Marg slashed low, cutting a leg out from under one. It collapsed, shrieking in a wet gurgle, and puffed a plume of glowing spores from its cracked ribs. She staggered back, coughing, eyes watering.

Um, limping but defiant, swung his curved blade and beheaded one. The corpse kept walking for two steps, arms flailing before dropping with a splatter. “They don’t damn *stop*!”

Tobi tried to intercept another, but one of the wretches tackled him, lifting him off the ground and hurling him into the stone wall. His back struck with a crack that echoed like a snapped branch. He collapsed, gasping, unable to rise.

“TOBI!” Furg roared, and something broke loose inside him.



He surged forward with a scream, burying his sword into a Sporewretch’s gut. It split open like a rotten melon, spraying steaming rot and white filaments. He didn’t stop. He turned and hacked through the next, cleaving it diagonally from shoulder to hip. Spore-blood soaked his arms. He bit down against the sting in his cheek and pressed on.

“You fungus-eyed shits! COME ON!”

He drove his sword through the head of a third, then swung wide, cleaving the arm off a fourth and kicking it into the wall. It crumpled, oozing spore-slime.

Um tried to retreat, but three Sporewretches were on him before he could limp back. One grabbed his sword arm and *bit it off at the elbow*. He screamed, eyes wide with agony. Another clamped onto his chest, fungal roots bursting from its fingers as they *ripped* into his ribs. The third seized his head—and *tore it free* in a single, wrenching twist. Bone snapped. Blood geysered. Um’s body collapsed to the ground twitching, headless.

“UM! *No—NO!*” Marg shrieked, charging forward, blade swinging madly. She carved down two in a whirlwind of grief and fury but took a claw to the side, splitting her armor open. Blood ran down her hip, staining the spores beneath her boots.

Furg couldn’t hear anything anymore except the rush of blood in his ears and the whisper of the Bloom around him. He was a storm in steel. He decapitated another, turned and gutted a seventh. His sword caught on ribs, jammed—and he *punched* the next Sporewretch in the face until it collapsed, fungal skull caved in.

The last two tried to flee, shambling back toward the dark.

“No,” Furg growled, stalking after them. “*You don’t get to run.*”

He grabbed one by the neck, dragged it back screaming, and crushed its skull against the stone floor until it stopped moving. The final one he impaled on a spike of rusted rebar protruding from the wall, leaving it hanging like a grotesque flag.

When it was done, the tunnel floor was a soup of rot, blood, and twitching limbs. The spores still drifted, glowing faintly like fireflies made of sickness.

Marg leaned against the wall, clutching her wound. “That was... *damn hell*. Gods above, they *ripped him apart*.”

Tobi groaned from the ground, blinking slowly. “I think my spine’s broken in four places... but I ain’t dead.”

Furg stood over Um’s remains, chest heaving, soaked in gore. He stared down, jaw clenched, teeth bloodied.

“Then we *keep going*,” he muttered, voice hollow. “We keep crawling, limping, spitting blood until this pit is behind us.”

He wiped his blade clean on a dead wretch’s robe and moved toward the next passage.

“Because if I die down here, I’m taking the *whole damn cave with me*.”

Furg crouched over Um’s mangled corpse, blood still seeping from the torn neck like thick wine. His sword trembled in his hand. Marg stood nearby, face ashen, her wound wrapped in a rag already soaked crimson. Tobi leaned against the wall, his back stiff and his breath shallow, arms trembling from the fight. None of them spoke for a moment.

Then Furg knelt, pulled off his torn cloak, and wrapped it around Um’s headless remains. He picked up the severed head with his free hand, his knuckles white, jaw clenched tight.

“We don’t leave our own behind,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Damn right,” Marg murmured, limping to his side. “He fought like hell.”

They made a stretcher from what they could—straps, broken planks, a bent shield—and hoisted Um’s body onto it. His head they wrapped in a bundle and strapped tightly to the makeshift litter. Furg and Tobi each took a side, Marg covering the rear with her sword raised.

The tunnel ahead was more winding than they remembered. The paths shifted like a dream gone wrong. Every corridor looked the same—curving black veins across the ceiling, wet stone underfoot, air thick with the stink of death and mushroom.

For thirty agonizing minutes they wandered, lost, until finally, Furg spotted a gash in the wall he remembered—a place where a chunk of stone had been torn free, forming a tooth-like marker.

“This way,” he grunted. “I know this part.”

They turned into the tunnel.

And that’s when they appeared.

Three figures stepped out of the dark like broken memories. The elf, gaunt and pale, moved in sharp jerks, eyes distant but tracking. The dwarf had rusted armor, half a helmet, and a sword crusted with old blood. His beard was torn into uneven tufts. And the halfling—a twitching, filthy little thing with empty eyes—ran his hands along the stone as though “searching” for traps on a wall that no longer held secrets.



They stopped when they saw Furg and the others.

The elf tilted his head. “Where’s Bren...? You’re not Bren...”

The halfling sniffed the air. “Fresh ones... He brought replacements!”

The dwarf screamed suddenly and charged, swinging wildly.

“Shit—drop him!” Furg barked, letting go of Um’s stretcher and drawing his blade.

The fight exploded in seconds.

The elf flitted past them with uncanny speed and slashed Tobi across the arm. Blood sprayed as Tobi cried out, falling to his knees.

Marg intercepted the halfling, who squealed and lunged with a bent dagger. She took a slice to the thigh but caught him in the ribs, sending him tumbling down with a wet snap.

Furg turned to meet the dwarf—who was screaming something about “holding the line”—and drove his sword into the brute’s side. But the dwarf didn’t feel pain. He grabbed a detached leg bone from the floor and *kicked* Um’s severed head with it, sending it flying across the tunnel. It hit the wall with a meaty *thud*, trailing blood.

“YOU FILTHY, DROOLING SHIT-STAIN!” Furg roared, barreling into him with a shoulder tackle that sent both tumbling. They rolled in blood and dust, fists smashing, blades clanging.

The dwarf headbutted Furg, splitting his brow.

Furg bit down, tasted his own blood, and *screamed* as he rammed his blade into the dwarf’s mouth—splitting teeth and jaw with a cracking snap. The dwarf collapsed, twitching.

Marg had skewered the halfling and now limped over, panting. “The elf!”

Tobi, despite his injury, had crawled after the elf and caught him from behind, plunging his short sword into the base of his spine. The elf gasped, shuddered, and turned—whispering, “Where’s Bren...?” before he slumped to the floor, dead.

The silence afterward was suffocating.

Furg stumbled over to where Um’s head had landed. He picked it up gently, wiping off the filth with what was left of his sleeve. “Sorry, brother,” he muttered. “We’ll get you out.”

Together, they gathered Um’s remains once again, binding the head tighter to the stretcher. They walked the final tunnel stretch in exhausted silence.

At last, the stone turned to dirt, then to moss, then to wind.

The cave entrance loomed ahead, moonlight slanting in.

They stepped out into the chill night air and *collapsed* just past the threshold, dropping Um’s body and falling to the ground like felled trees.

No words were spoken for a long time.

Furg lay on his back, arms spread, his face still streaked in dried blood. Marg sat beside the stretcher, staring into the distance, breathing shallow. Tobi groaned softly, every motion sending pain through his bones.

“We made it,” Furg whispered. “Damn gods... we made it.”

“Barely,” Marg rasped. “I’m gonna shit mushrooms for a week.”

Tobi chuckled, then coughed. “If I ever see another cave, I’m burning it. With me *outside* this time.”

The dead lay still beside them.

The living just breathed.

And the dark behind them whispered its hunger for more.

The grove felt colder on the way back, less alive, as if the earth knew what they carried. Furg, Tobi, and Marg moved in silence, Um’s body slung between them on the stained stretcher, the severed head wrapped tight. No words were needed. The rot of the tunnels still clung to their clothes, the stink of spores and blood soaked into their skin.

By the time they reached the fighters guild, dawn was bleeding into the sky. The gate creaked open and the yard was quiet. Ragarok stood at the steps with arms folded, his eyes falling to the stretcher without surprise.

“You made it,” he said. “Didn’t expect that.”

Furg stepped forward. “We ran into more than bandits. The tunnels were infested—Mirecoils, Sporewretches, and... things that used to be adventurers. We barely got out.”

Ragarok glanced at Um’s remains. “Except him.”

Marg nodded grimly. “He died swinging.”

Ragarok sighed, then gestured with a jerk of his head. “Take him to the back. You know the drill.”

No gravestone. No farewell. Just dirt, and sweat, and silence. They dug in the hard earth until the hole was deep enough, then lowered Um in. The soil thudded over him until only memory remained.

When they returned, Ragarok tossed a pouch onto the table with a dull jingle. “Thirty-nine gold. Your cut for the job—and surviving.”

Furg split the coins. “Thirteen each.”

Marg took hers with a nod and limped off toward the dorms. Tobi tucked his into a torn pouch. Furg weighed his coins in his palm, then looked up.

“We need blades. Real ones.”

Tobi smirked. “No more borrowed rust buckets? Damn right.”

They made their way through Azir’s morning crowd, winding through the markets to the armorer’s shop. The same narrow-faced half-elf was there, polishing a helm.

“Back from the dead again?” he said.

“Barely,” Furg muttered. “We want short swords. Two.”

The armorer pulled them from the rack—gleaming, simple weapons, each blade polished so clean it caught the morning sun and shimmered like faery fire on dew.

“Eight gold each.”

They paid, the weight of coin lifting with satisfaction.

As Furg turned to leave, his eye caught a small iron-rimmed shield, half-hidden behind a stack of helms.

“That one,” he said, pointing. “I’ll take it.”

“Ten gold,” the armorer said without blinking.

Furg grunted. “You’ve sold worse for six.”

“This isn’t worse.”

“It’s got a crack on the strap,” Furg said, flipping it over and showing the frayed leather. “It’ll break the first time someone hits it with a real axe.”

The armorer frowned. “Eight. No lower.”

Furg nodded and dropped the last of his gold on the counter. “Pleasure.”

With his new leather armor, a sharp blade, and a proper shield, Furg felt—for the first time—like a true fighter.

Back at the guild, Ragarok introduced the new blood. A tall elf woman with hawk-sharp eyes and a bow strung across her back stepped forward.

“This is Valak,” Ragarok grunted. “You’re her problem now.”

Valak gave a brief nod. “I shoot fast, and I don’t miss.”

Furg met her gaze. “We bury our dead.”

“I don’t plan to be one,” she replied, then turned and walked toward the dorms.

Later that night, the four of them—Furg, Tobi, Marg, and Valak—sat around a table at the Vicious Mole, tankards of frothy black ale in hand. A plate of deer meat, potatoes, and stewed tomatoes steamed between them.

Tobi raised his mug. “To Um.”

They all drank.

Marg slammed her empty mug down. “And to not dying tomorrow.”

Valak smirked. “You lot are already half-dead.”

Furg tore a chunk of meat from his fork, washed it down with ale, and leaned back with a tired grin. “Yeah, but the half that’s still kicking knows how to swing a blade now.”

They laughed, bruised and scarred and hollow-eyed—but together.

And for one night, at least, they let the dark stay outside the door. In a few hours the party returned to the Fighters Guild.

Serpent Hills

The sun hadn't yet cleared the haze when Furg, Tobi, Marg, and Valak woke up as Ragarok handed Furg a rolled parchment.

“Priest came by,” Ragarok said. “Claims their chapel up in the Serpent Hills’s been fouled by some monk playing at curses. Said the light’s gone dim, the altar’s cold, and the birds stopped singing.”

“What’s our job?” Marg asked, leaning back against a barrel.

“Clean it out. Whatever’s inside, remove it. Permanently. No sermons, no saving, just blade and blood.”

Valak smirked, stringing her bow. “My kind of temple visit.” I will pack some blessed oil with me.

The cart clattered down the dusty road, the Serpent Hills rising in gentle folds of brown and green. It was a warm and rainy day—mocking the gravity of what they were riding toward. A breeze tugged at their cloaks. Tobi said little, his back still stiff from the blow in the tunnels, but his grip on his sword never slackened.

After a few hours, the silhouette of the church came into view—an old, crumbling thing of stone and vine, nestled at the foot of a hill. It looked abandoned, yet... not asleep. Still, like a held breath. No birds sang. No bugs buzzed. Just the wind, whispering through broken stained glass.

They left the mule cart behind a clump of rocks and approached on foot. As they neared the heavy oak doors, Valak placed a hand to her chest and murmured, “Mirith watches over us. I walk beneath Her wings. All evil breaks against Her light.”

Furg glanced at her. “Good. You tell Mirith to keep her hands up. I’ve seen too many gods turn their backs.”

Valak said nothing, only drew an arrow and held it ready.

Furg pushed the church door open. The wood groaned, the creak echoing into the hollow nave. Inside, dust swirled like ghost-breath. The air was thick—sour with candle wax,

mildew, and something far older. The altar ahead was cracked down the middle, and faded tapestries hung like skin on bone.



They heard a voice.

“...unworthy... defiler... heretic...”

It slithered from the dark above the altar like oil through parchment.

A figure emerged—floating slightly above the ground, draped in what once might have been holy robes, now tattered and blackened. Its wings were thin, skeletal outlines of what once was glory, feathers long rotted to shadow. Its face was an empty look, cracked, weeping lightless tears.

The *Hollow Seraph*.

It raised one hand, fingers bent like broken candles, and pointed toward them.

“Brenna of the Choir. Varlik the Scribe. Keth. They *all* fell. You come to *mock* their fall?”

“Shit,” Tobi whispered, drawing steel. “What the hell is that?”

Marg narrowed her eyes. “Doesn’t matter. We kill it.”

The Seraph let out a screech like breaking stained glass—and *attacked*.

It moved with unnatural grace, gliding above the floor. A wave of force blasted from it, knocking Tobi and Marg back. Valak rolled aside and let loose an arrow—it struck the Seraph’s side and *vanished* in a puff of ash, as if it had never been real.



Furg charged, shield up. The Seraph raised its arm, and ghostly chains shot from its sleeve, wrapping around Furg’s legs and yanking him off his feet.

“*Heretic!*” it screamed.

“*Retarded maggot!*” Furg roared, slashing upward as he fell. His blade scraped against incorporeal ribs, and a burst of searing light burned his skin.

Marg came in from the side, hammering her sword against the thing’s back. The Seraph turned, grabbed her by the throat, and *lifted* her off the ground. Her legs kicked in the air as it whispered, “Vows broken. Flesh condemned.”

Valak fired another arrow—this one tipped in blessed oil. It hit the Seraph’s shoulder and stuck. The thing *screeched*, dropping Marg. The wound sizzled, and its glow dimmed briefly.

“Blessed tips!” Valak shouted. “We can hurt it!”

Tobi, limping, flanked right and threw his sword like a javelin. It pierced through the Seraph’s torso and pinned it against a shattered column. The thing shrieked, wings flailing as its body flickered like a flame under water.

Furg pulled himself up, grabbed his blade, and charged again. “Go back to your gods, freak!”

He plunged the sword into the Seraph's chest, twisting it. The face split down the middle, revealing nothing beneath—just void, endless and howling. A shockwave exploded outward, hurling them all back against the pews.

And then... silence.

The Hollow Seraph's body dissolved into ribbons of smoke and ash. All that remained was a cold wind that slipped out through the broken stained glass, carrying with it the last whisper:

"...remember... us..."

The church grew still once more.

Furg lay on his back, blood dripping from his mouth, breathing hard. "Anyone... *not* bleeding?"

Tobi groaned. "I think my bones forgot how to sit straight."

Marg pulled herself up with a cough. "Next time we're hired by a priest, we double the pay."

Valak knelt at the altar and murmured a short prayer to Mirith.

As the dust from the ruined church settled behind them, a breeze stirred strangely from the rear of the building. Furg squinted through the midday light and spotted a small rise of disturbed earth near a crumbling headstone. Approaching, they saw it—an old wooden cellar hatch, one side thrown open as if something had fled, or emerged.

"Well that's not ominous," Tobi muttered.

Furg stepped forward, sword drawn. "Hatch like this behind a cursed church? There's always more."

They descended cautiously, boots thudding against damp steps. The air grew musty—thick with the smell of tallow, dust, and something sharper beneath, like old blood sealed under stone. The torch Marg carried flickered as they entered a low, circular cellar, walls lined with crumbling mortar and shelves that had long ago given way to decay.

On a warped table sat a half-burned circle of candles, their wax melted in strange, spiraling patterns. And at the center—an open tome.

Furg approached it slowly. The pages were yellowed, brittle, but marked in sharp, black ink. No language he recognized. The symbols curved unnaturally, as if the ink itself had tried to crawl off the page. Sketches accompanied the text: a pentagram; a face of some creature with ancient text around it.

"Whatever this is," Furg muttered, "it doesn't belong in a church."

Valak peered over his shoulder. "That writing... I've seen something like it in elven ruins. Pre-schism. Older than most trees alive."



Beyond the far side of the cellar, a stone door stood ajar—massive and gray-veined, marked with faint scratches as if someone had tried to claw it closed. A cold draft hissed from the opening.

Tobi grabbed a fresh torch. “Nothing good ever came from going deeper.”

“And nothing worth killing ever stayed on the surface,” Marg added grimly.

They descended again, this time down ancient stairs carved into the earth, their feet echoing against the walls. As they reached the bottom, the crypt unfolded before them—long vaults of stone, damp and death-still. Bones jutted from recesses in the wall, laid in ceremonial poses that had collapsed long ago.

They turned into a side tunnel, drawn by the thrum in the air.

The sound struck them all at once—a deep vibration that passed not through their ears but through their *bones*. The torchlight bent slightly, as if light itself was uncertain of the path. And then, ahead, shapes flickered into being.

Six of them.

Echoes of the Uncast.

They hovered in the center of the corridor, half-formed humanoid specters that shimmered and pulsed. Their bodies twisted in incomplete gestures—hands caught in the middle of somatic signs, mouths open mid-word, but no sound emerging. Occasionally, their shapes

shifted—one became an elderly man for a second, then a young girl, then a coiled symbol of glowing glyphs. They radiated no heat, no breath—just raw, unfinished *intention*.

“They’re... spells,” Valak said softly. “Ghosts of spells. Magic that never finished.”

Then the echoes moved.

They struck like wind and lightning—lashing tendrils of warped light sweeping toward the party. The ground trembled with each pulse.

“Shields up!” Furg barked, raising his.

One of the echoes struck Tobi full in the chest, flinging him into the wall where he collapsed, groaning. Another passed *through* Marg, leaving her gasping, her skin briefly lit from within by veins of arcane energy. She screamed and staggered, swinging her sword wildly.

Furg rushed forward and cleaved one through the torso—it split with a shriek of static, sending a shockwave down the tunnel that cracked the stones around them. He turned, blade glowing faintly, and stabbed another just as it reached for Valak.

But he was a second too slow.

The echo’s half-formed hand struck Valak in the neck—a bolt of flickering light burst from her mouth as she choked, dropping her bow. Blood ran freely from the wound, bubbling.

“Valak!” Furg shouted, slashing the echo in half. Its form collapsed into mist, discharging a blast of heatless flame that scorched the walls.

Marg lunged forward, dragging Valak back, pressing a cloth against her throat. “You’re fine, you’re *not dying*, don’t you dare.”

Valak blinked, her mouth red, but she nodded, barely holding consciousness.

Tobi rose, blade in hand, limping badly. “Two left!”

Furg dodged a beam of light and rolled, driving his sword through one echo’s “chest.” The spell let out a choir of overlapping voices and disintegrated, releasing a shockwave that knocked everyone off their feet.

Marg killed the last one with a final upward slash, the echo bursting into a cold wind that smelled of old parchment and blood.

Silence returned to the crypt, the only sound their ragged breathing and Valak’s muffled gasps as she held her neck.

“Gods damn those things,” Tobi spat. “What were they even *trying* to cast?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Furg growled. “They didn’t finish. And neither will we—not until this crypt’s clean.”

He pulled the tome from his satchel, the one from the cellar.

“Whatever's deeper down here... it's connected to *this*.”

They bandaged Valak's neck as best they could, picked up their weapons, and pressed deeper into the tunnel—where the air grew colder, the light dimmer, and the hum of unfinished spells still trembled just beyond the edge of hearing.

The tunnel narrowed before opening into a chamber that breathed rot and silence. The stench hit first—thick, coppery, and foul with the staleness of aged blood. The flickering torchlight caught glistening streaks along the walls—*smears* of blood, darkened with time, drawn in frantic, crude patterns that told no story, only agony.

In the center of the room, a human body was torn in half, the upper torso splayed across the cold stone, entrails coiled like a serpent around the lower half. The corpse had once been a woman, now mutilated, her limbs deliberately arranged—arms arched, fingers curled in unnatural gestures, her face turned up to the vaulted ceiling, lips sewn shut. Around her, a pentagram had been carved into the floor, thick with smeared blood and dried sinew.

At each point of the pentagram sat a small stone statue—humanoid in shape, faceless save for the *crystals* embedded where eyes should be. They stared blankly forward, catching the torchlight like dying stars.

“Holy lords,” Tobi muttered, stepping back. “What in all unholy hells is this?”

“Some kind of ritual,” Valak said, her voice hoarse. Her hand instinctively touched the bandage on her neck. “Not recent, but still breathing power.”

Furg didn't respond. He knelt by the statues, staring into the crystal eyes. Then the air *shifted*—a sudden chill, like the floor itself had inhaled.

From the pentagram, *five figures* rose like smoke caught in reverse—wraithlike, fragile in form, faces veiled in tattered silk etched with faint carvings. They hovered above the ground, trailing wisps of grey mist, and their presence settled like grief in the marrow.

Mourning Vestiges.

Their voices came in shreds of memory, fragments of voices stolen from dreams.

“Why didn't you wait for me...?”

“I was *just outside the door*...”

“Don't forget me again...”

The party staggered under the weight of emotion. Marg wept silently, sword still clenched. Tobi looked as if he might be sick.

Then the Vestiges *screamed*—a hollow, echoing wail that bent the air like heat rising from a corpse fire.

One lashed out with a wave of force that sent Furg flying across the chamber. He slammed into the wall with a crunch, air ripped from his lungs. Before he could rise, a veil-wrapped tendril of force coiled around his neck—*strangling him*—tightening with each heartbeat.



“Furg!” Valak screamed.

Sound waves rippled through the air, visible, vibrating, slicing skin and rattling teeth. Blood ran from their noses and ears. Their very thoughts seemed to *splinter* under the unnatural pressure.

Maggots and cockroaches burst from cracks in the tiles, swarming over the floor. One Vestige split open with a sound like weeping glass, and the insects spilled forth like bile.

Marg slashed with her sword, each hit scattering pieces of mist and voice—but it did not kill them.

“Read their veils!” Valak shouted. “The names—there’s names carved into the silk!”

Tobi crawled toward one, coughing blood, and read a name aloud. “Myrina Vel! Born to Tharos and Ellan!”

The Vestige convulsed—its scream rose in pitch before it *burst*, vanishing into ash and silence.

“I think it worked!” he gasped.

Furg, choking, reached with trembling fingers and *ripped* the veil off the one strangling him. The carved name shimmered: *Thane Morricks*. He choked the name out between gasps. “Thane... *Morricks!*”

The Vestige shrieked in defiance and exploded in a gust of freezing wind.

The rest fell in a storm of blades and shouted names—some guessed, some right, some terribly wrong. When Marg misspoke one, the creature lunged and sank spectral claws into her arm, shredding flesh to bone before Valak put two arrows into its throat.

When the last faded, silence returned—save for the wet sound of cockroaches popping beneath their boots.

Furg coughed and sat upright, rubbing his raw throat. “I... *hate* this place.”

Tobi drank from a healing vial, teeth chattering. “That was grief weaponized. *Damn grief.*”

Marg sat on the cold ground, wrapping her bleeding arm with strips of her cloak. “I saw my brother. He died in a fire. Thought I buried that memory years ago.”

Valak checked her bow, blood still trickling from her neck. “It’s not just the dead here. It’s the forgotten.”

They drank what potions they had left and tied their wounds. The chamber was still now, save for the faint drip of blood from the pentagram. They gathered themselves and turned to the side passage.

The tunnel ahead was long and wet. Water dripped from unseen cracks. Moss crept up the walls like bruises. None of them spoke.

The silence was no longer just absence of sound.

It was *mourning*.

The tunnel ahead narrowed, the walls slick with condensation and the smell of mildew thick in the stale air. They walked in silence, footfalls muted by grime, until suddenly—a sharp metallic *click* sounded beneath Furg’s boot.

The floor dropped.

All four plunged with a roar into the black below, water swallowing them whole.

Furg’s head cracked the surface first, sputtering. Valak screamed. Marg surfaced coughing violently, eyes wide, throat bulging with water as she hacked it up. Tobi flailed for the wall, boots scraping on stone.

Cold. Pitch dark. Their torch hissed and died in the fall.

“Grab the ledge!” Furg bellowed, kicking toward the side.

They clawed their way out, soaked and shivering, pulling themselves up onto slick stone steps. Marg collapsed on her back, gasping, soaked through. Tobi coughed blood. Valak shook water from her hair, checking her quiver—half ruined.

They lit another torch.

“Damn maggot of a pit trap,” Marg growled, spitting.

They carried on, water squelching in their boots, every muscle aching with cold. As they rounded a bend, Valak threw up a hand.

“Wait.”

Across the tunnel, just above ankle height, a rope gleamed faintly. It stretched taut from wall to wall, nearly invisible in the gloom.

Furg knelt, traced it to a side-mounted iron casing. His fingers found a tension mechanism bound to two notched grooves.

“Pressure catch,” he muttered. “Would’ve launched a pair of spears straight into our skulls.”

He snipped the line with his dagger. The trap gave a soft *snap*—harmless now.

They moved deeper.

From ahead, a flicker of light. Then the soft clink of glass. A wet, wheezing breath. The echo of something metal *dragging*.

Eight figures emerged from the dark. Each clad in rotted surgeon's garb, stained aprons stiff with dried gore. Bone saws hung from belts, flensing knives strapped to their forearms. Their faces were hidden behind blood-smeared masks, leather stitched over their mouths. Jars of grayish liquid dangled from their belts, filled with floating tissue and twitching nerve ends.

Gallowmire Surgeons.

One held a rusted clamp in skeletal hands and whispered in a voice that came from nowhere, “This won’t hurt. *Much*.”

“Fuck this,” Tobi whispered, drawing his sword.

The Surgeons surged forward.

The first clamped Marg’s wrist, jerking her arm out with impossible force. She screamed—and in one flick of its wrist, it *ripped her arm clean off*, muscle tearing like fabric. Blood sprayed the tunnel wall.

“MARG!” Furg roared, but he couldn’t reach her in time.

Another Surgeon jammed a saw into her gut, dragged upward, ribs snapping like brittle wood. She collapsed in a flood of blood and internal steam. A third Surgeon split her body down the spine. What was left of her twitched and then lay still.

Tobi screamed and slashed wildly, catching one across the chest. It bled thick black ichor, but didn't flinch.



“Stay back!” Valak shouted, loosing arrows one after another. One arrow sank through a Surgeon’s eye, but the creature kept walking, still whispering surgical prayers.

Furg brawled with two at once, shield shattered by the jaws of a rusty bone clamp. One Surgeon grabbed him and jammed its fingers *up into his nostrils*, bone-deep. His scream was guttural, blood pouring from his face as cartilage crunched.

“Let go of me, *you plague-sucking fuck!*” he howled, headbutting the thing until its jaw came loose.

Tobi fell to one knee, blade slipping from his hand. He collapsed unconscious, a Surgeon dragging a scalpel across his thigh with deliberate precision.

Valak threw a flask of burning oil. It caught two, engulfing them in shrieking flame. The smell of cloves, bile, and burning human fat filled the air.

Furg, broken-nosed and soaked in gore, took up Marg’s sword and rammed it through the chest of the last Surgeon, twisting until the thing gurgled and dropped.

Silence followed—wet, stinking, trembling silence.

They stood amidst piles of severed limbs, soaked cloth, and steam rising from blood-warmed stones. Tobi groaned faintly on the ground. Valak was limping, face pale.

Furg dropped to his knees beside Marg's ruined corpse. His hands shook as he closed what was left of her eyes.

"She's gone."

"She died fast," Valak said quietly, her voice hollow. "That's... something."

"No," Furg rasped. "It's not."

He sat back, face wet with tears and blood, and pulled a strip of bread from his pouch. Valak passed him water. Tobi stirred weakly and sat upright, silent.

They ate in silence—just a few bites, just enough to stop the shaking. Furg drank healing potion with shaking hands, eyes still on the corpse.

They couldn't carry her now. Not through more tunnels. Not yet.

"We'll take her back," Furg said, standing, teeth clenched. "I'm not leaving her here."

Valak nodded, bow trembling in her grip. "We'll come back for her."



Tobi wiped blood from his eyes. "Let's finish this. So she didn't die for nothing."

They left Marg's body by the wall, beneath a burned Surgeon's cloak, sword laid across her chest.

The tunnel ahead waited, dark and dripping. And the deeper they went, the colder it became.

The tunnel twisted again, the air thickening like mucus in the lungs. Furg led, torch flickering in his fist, the flame burning low despite the stillness. Tobi limped behind, leaning on his blade as a crutch. Valak moved in silence, her steps light but her breath ragged.

They smelled the room before they saw it—iron, bile, and milk gone sour. Then came the voices.

“Sanguinis redeamus. Nomina perfracta. Filii non recedant...”

The chant pulsed through the stone, a dead tongue that rasped at the edges of sanity.

They stepped into the chamber. Blood painted the walls in fan-like sprays. Some dried, some still weeping. Black candles flickered on shelves, their wax bubbling crimson. In the center, kneeling atop a circle of smeared ashes and teeth, was *her*.

A Kinspawn Matron.

Her dress was once noble, now rotted and fused with her skin. Her pale face cracked like old porcelain, eyes sunken yet twitching. Her lips curled in a smile of infinite sadness. She held something in her lap—a church relic, shaped like a sunburst, now streaked with gore.

“Come home, little ones,” she said, voice like wind dragging across a cradle. “Mama’s been waiting. So *long*. You’ve all grown so ugly...”

She began to hum. A lullaby twisted and broken, older than sense.

Furg drew his sword. “She’s rotting magic. Tobi. Valak. We end this.”

The Matron rose slowly, impossibly tall, her limbs elongating as bones cracked and reset. She let out a sudden *laugh*, hollow and piercing, and the *floor pulsed*. Flesh tore from her chest and black, slick things spilled out—gnashing spawn, slithering like infants with teeth.

“NO!” Tobi shouted, driving his blade into the floor as one spawn lunged. It shrieked, called him *brother*, and bit into his leg. He screamed, twisting it off and crushing it underfoot.

Valak loosed two arrows in quick succession. One hit the Matron in the neck, black pus spraying from the wound. She laughed again—and vomited.

A stream of squirming *maggots* burst from her mouth, spraying directly into Furg’s face.

He staggered, howling, clawing at his skin. The maggots writhed in his beard, burrowed into his lips and cheeks.

“Get them off! GET THEM OFF!”

Valak vomited into the corner, retching uncontrollably. “Gods, she—she puked her damn *womb* on you—!”

Tobi hurled a chunk of broken stone, smashing a brazier onto one of the spawn. Flames caught. The Matron shrieked and reeled.

Furg, blinded by wriggling filth, felt the heat of her presence near. He roared and *swung blindly*, his blade catching her midsection. She screamed—not in pain, but in *loss*, her voice shattering the nearest candle.

The relic clattered to the floor.

Valak wiped her mouth, notched a blood-stained arrow, and let it fly—straight through the Matron’s temple. Her body twisted like silk in water, limbs flailing, then collapsed into wet, shapeless folds.

Tobi stepped forward and drove his sword into the Matron’s twitching belly, silencing the last of the spawn.

They stood in silence, broken and shivering.

Furg spat out a final maggot, wiping blood and slime from his face. “Burn the damned cradle. We’re not coming back.”

Valak nodded, scooping up the relic with trembling hands.

They made their way back to Marg’s body, still beneath the Surgeon’s cloak. Without words, they wrapped her again and hoisted her between them.

Outside, the air hit like judgment. Cold rain began to fall, hard and fast, drenching them as they laid Marg’s corpse on the cart and placed the relic at the foot of the ruined church.

Valak stood before it a moment, her soaked cloak clinging to her. “Whatever god lived here... they’re not home anymore.”

Tobi climbed onto the cart, holding the reins. “Let’s get out of this grave.”

The road back was misery.

Rain turned the dirt to sludge. Wheels sank and stuck. Furg and Tobi hauled the cart free by sheer force, slipping, swearing, boots lost in the mud. Valak walked beside Marg’s body, silent the whole way, never meeting the others’ eyes.

Furg, soaked to the bone, dragging the cart through another rut, muttered, “This was supposed to be simple. Walk in. Kill a monk. Clean out a church.”

Tobi grunted. “Instead we killed grief, infection, goddamn ancestry, and my damn knee.”

Valak finally spoke, her voice low, trembling. “Marg died to kill something that shouldn’t exist. Don’t make her death just another stain on the wall.”

Furg looked at her, rain streaking down his bloodied face. He gave a single nod.

They rode in silence the rest of the way.

Mud, rain, blood—and one fewer soul among them.

The rain had turned to drizzle by the time Azir's crooked rooftops and smoke-streaked chimneys appeared through the mist. The city gates loomed like old scars, and the mule cart clattered over the stone path, wheels coated in mud and dried blood. Marg's remains lay wrapped under soaked canvas, silent and heavy.

Furg said nothing as they passed through the outer streets. Tobi kept one hand on the reins, the other gripping the hilt of his blade like it was all that kept him upright. Valak sat stiffly in the back, her eyes fixed on the cloth-draped bundle that used to be their comrade.

The guild's iron doors opened to a grim reception. No words. No questions. Just the quiet acknowledgment of returned soldiers.

They drove the cart to the rear of the guild yard and unloaded Marg in silence. Furg took the shovel first, and Tobi joined without a word. The ground was soft from rain, but it still resisted. They dug until the earth opened just enough for her, then lowered her in without ceremony.

No prayers. No markings. Just dirt, again and again, until her grave looked like the others.

Ragarok found them in the hall, oil-lantern in one hand, expression carved from stone. He looked them over—mud-caked, torn clothes, blood on their boots, more sunken in the eyes than when they left.

Furg stepped forward. “Church is clean. Relic retrieved. Marg’s buried.”

Ragarok gave a grunt, wiping rain from his brow. His face was sourer than usual.

“Three others died while you were gone,” he said, almost absently. “One got gutted on a bounty run, two ambushed bringing meat from the eastern range. Bloody week.”

Then he looked them dead-on. “But hey... that’s what we do, right? We fight—and we *damn* well die.”

He pulled a pouch from his belt and tossed it onto the table. “Thirty gold. Ten each. Take it before I change my mind.”

Furg caught the pouch mid-air, passed it around. “Still warm,” he muttered. “Must be from the corpses.”

Valak snorted despite herself.

Later, in the dining hall, the three of them slumped around a low table. Plates clattered with boiled onions and burnt meat. The ale flowed darker than the sky outside.

Furg took a deep draught straight from the barrel tap, filled a mug to the brim, and *downed it in one long pull*. When he slammed the empty mug on the table, he leaned in toward Valak and *croaked*—a deep, guttural belch that stank of damp bread and sour iron.

“Hells,” she choked, leaning back. “You trying to *kill* me?”

Furg grinned, his beard still glistening with foam. “That’s a damn *fine* piece of dark mead for me. Nothing better than a fight and a mug that puts your eyes *swimming* afterward.”

Valak wrinkled her nose, then laughed. “You need to bathe in vinegar.”

Ragarok came stomping through the hall, slapping shoulders, chewing on a chunk of dried lamb. He stopped behind Tobi, gave him a long look, then drove his fist *straight* into Tobi’s gut.

Tobi doubled over with a wheeze. “What the hells was that for?!”

Ragarok shrugged. “Job’s not just to swing blades. It’s to keep each other *alive*. Don’t forget it.” He walked off, tossing the lamb bone into the fire.

The three sat for a while longer, sipping slowly.

“You hear the twins got assigned to that noble caravan?” Tobi asked, rubbing his stomach.

“They won’t last a week,” Furg said. “Nobles pay well but bleed slow.”

“I heard someone saw a ghost cat in the back cellar,” Valak added. “Made of ash. Keeps whispering ‘Not yet.’”

Furg scoffed. “That’s just Jarek in his sleep. Bastard talks like a drunk priest when he’s dreaming.”

They chuckled, voices quiet under the creak of rain and timber.

Tobi looked down at his cup. “Do you think Marg knew she was going to die?”

Furg stared into the fire. “She *knew* she wasn’t going to live forever. That’s enough.”

No one said more after that. They just sat there, listening to the wind through the rafters, the scrape of cutlery on tin, and the sound of warriors trying to feel alive, one mug at a time.

Investigation

Rain still clung to Azir’s stone bones when Ragarok summoned Furg, Valak, and Tobi to his quarters. The oil lamps were low, casting everything in a yellow fog. Ragarok sat behind his desk, a rolled scroll in one hand, his usual scowl deeper than usual.

“You’re getting a soft one this time,” he grunted, tossing the scroll to Furg. “No blades. No blood. At least not yet.”

Furg caught it and unrolled the seal. The paper bore the sigil of the Guild of Cartographers and Histories—quill and compass crossed over a faded star. The writing inside was careful, tight, and formal:

"Esteemed representatives of Murkar’s Fighters,

Your services are required for a matter of civic sensitivity. Recent weeks have seen a concerning trend: altered historical documents, missing maps, and a rise in public performances of tales not known to any official chronicle. The stories are... wrong. Details twisted. Names misplaced.

We suspect a group is working to reshape Azir’s official record—quietly, precisely, and with intent. This cannot be handled openly. Discretion is required. If you can find the source, report your findings. Action will be authorized only if absolutely necessary.

Furg finished reading and looked up. “No swords?”

Ragarok scratched his chin. “No open fights. But I didn’t say don’t *wear* them. You see something that needs stabbing, make damn sure it deserves it.

Valak folded her arms. “And what exactly are we looking for? Someone rewriting stories?”

“Someone rewriting *truth*,” Ragarok said. “And if they’re right, that’s dangerous. And if they’re *wrong*, it’s worse. Go sniff around. Ask smart questions. Don’t come back without names.”

By midday, they were moving through the quieter avenues of Azir—less blood, more cobblestone, the air thick with ink and damp parchment.

The party walked to Mapmakers’ Hall.

The building was nestled beneath a sloping roof of blue tile, its doors flanked by two ancient stone globes etched with rivers and borders long outdated. Inside, the air was dry and cool, filled with the scent of dust and ink. Long tables groaned under scrolls, and narrow-eyed apprentices moved quietly between stacks.

A bent old man in bronze-rimmed spectacles greeted them.

“Here about the disappearances?” he asked softly. “I hoped they’d send investigators, not swords.”

Furg gave a nod. “No swords today. Tell us what’s missing.”

The man led them into the back vaults—rows of sealed cabinets, one open and nearly empty.

“Maps of the old wards. Specifically, pre-Division layouts. Some replaced with forgeries so good we only noticed when cross-checking with elevation records. Streets that *never existed*. Rivers drawn where none flowed.”

Valak frowned. “Why forge city maps?”

The old man tapped a long finger to his nose. “Because the past shapes the present. Change a border, you rewrite ownership. Change a street, you claim a right that was never yours. You control the *memory* of a city, and you control its future.”

Tobi muttered, “That’s damned unsettling.”

Their next stop was the Scriptorium of Azir.

The building was tall, thin, with quiet gold-pane windows and a garden choked with ivy. Inside, dozens of copyists hunched over parchment, their pens whispering in perfect rhythm. They spoke to a woman named Larisse—short-haired, red-robed, eyes sunken from too many sleepless nights.

She led them to a side table where an open ledger sat—two versions of the same city census.

“One was finished three days ago,” she said. “The second appeared the next morning, unsigned. At first glance, identical. But...”

She pointed. “A new noble family is listed here. The *Korrens*. They don’t exist. Never have. But they’re now showing up in tax rolls, in merchant accounts. Like someone’s rewriting them *into* history.”

Valak’s hand drifted to her bow, instinctively. Furg stilled her.

“No arrows. Not yet.”

Tobi leaned over the ledger. “So we’ve got forgeries in maps and records. All just... slipping into the official record.”

Larisse nodded grimly. “If this keeps up, in another month you’ll start seeing statues erected to people who never breathed. Then laws based on deeds no one did.”

They left the Scriptorium with more questions than answers.

Furg muttered, “Someone’s rewriting the soul of the damn city.”

Valak adjusted her cloak. “And they’re doing it well. Too well.”

Tobi looked up at the sky, grey and bleeding with mist. “Feels like we’re walking through a story someone else already wrote.”

Furg nodded once. “Then let’s find the quill before it carves out someone else’s truth.”

The party returned to the Mapmakers' Hall under a sky the color of old parchment. Inside, the vaults buzzed with tension. Apprentices moved with forced calm, and doors once left ajar now stood shut. They were ushered through narrow corridors lined with old cartography into a secure chamber guarded by two older scribes with watchful eyes and sharp quills.

The Vault Curator waited behind a polished table, flanked by scroll racks and a brass globe missing its western hemisphere. He was a tall, sinewy man with deep lines etched into his forehead and eyes like ink-drops in milk. He did not rise as the party entered.

"You're from Murkar's?" he asked curtly.

Furg gave a stiff nod. "We're not here to rough parchment."

"Good," the Curator said. "Because this hall is under siege, and the blade cannot fix what ink has already poisoned."

He unfurled a scroll—an old map of Azir's lower ring, faded and brittle. Next to it, a newer one: nearly identical, save for two narrow tunnels drawn under a district near the city wall.

"These were reviewed by my hand. Only I and the top three archivists had access. And yet..." He tapped the second map. "These tunnels never existed. We cross-checked with stone ledger records—no permits, no excavation. Nothing."

"You think someone inside did it?" Valak asked.

"I *know* they did," the Curator replied, his voice low. "The revisions were flawless. Made with our inks. Our templates. But not our minds. This hall is bleeding from within."

Tobi leaned closer. "Any suspects?"

The Curator's jaw tightened. "One apprentice was caught copying the forged map into the traveler's registry. We turned him out yesterday."

They found the scribe in a side chamber, hunched over a satchel, his cloak damp from the rain. Barely twenty winters old, his hands shook as Furg stepped in.

"I didn't *know* what I was doing was wrong!" the scribe blurted. "It was just a commission. Some merchant type in a green hood—paid me four silver to redraw the map with 'expanded subroutes.' I thought it was for a historical tour!"

"Did you see his face?" Valak asked sharply.

"No. Just a coin pouch and a gloved hand. But—he left this."

The boy fished something from his satchel: a scrap of parchment. On it, pressed faintly in wax, was a *sigil*—a tree with roots spiraling downward, like a drill into the earth.

Tobi narrowed his eyes. "We saw this on the false census page. A watermark under the noble seal."

Valak ran her finger along the parchment's edge. "A tree digging into a spiral. That's not just a family crest. It's a message."

Furg folded the paper and tucked it into his vest. "Let's see if we hear it again."

They left the hall and wandered through the merchant quarter, now thick with foot traffic and distant music. As they neared the central fountain, a small crowd had gathered around a man on a crate—tall, rail-thin, with a grey cloak and a sharp tongue.

He was reciting in rhythm, voice clear and strangely melodic.

"Before the stone, the river ran,
Beneath the city's crooked span.
It sang to bones, it drank the deep,
Where secrets lie and angels sleep."

People chuckled and clapped, thinking it nonsense. But Furg's hand went to his blade.

Valak leaned in. "He's not reciting a tale. That's a damn warning."

The performer met her gaze briefly. A flicker of recognition. Then he bowed, stepped off the crate, and vanished into the crowd.

Tobi muttered, "The River Below the Stone... That's not a legend I've ever heard."

"No," Furg said, his voice hard. "It's a *buried one*."

They stood in the square as the last note of the poem echoed across cobblestones.

A sigil in wax. A map that lied. A man who spoke with the voice of the dead.

Something ancient was moving under Azir—and it was *writing back*.

Rain slicked the cobbles of Azir's Underterrace District as the party slipped through its crooked alleys, cloaks drawn close and weapons sheathed beneath layers of civility. Lanterns glowed dull behind stained glass; the walls of the city here leaned inward like gossiping crones, listening.

"Subtle," Furg grunted, tugging his hood lower. "Nothing says 'secrets' like mold and too much poetry."

Valak shot him a look. "We're not here to fight. We're here to listen."

"And lie," Tobi added, adjusting the pin on his collar—an ivy-shaped brooch that marked them as supposed "Friends of the Forgotten," a title they'd heard whispered by street poets and in the mouth of a drunk scribe who swore that names lost to time weren't truly dead—just *waiting*.

Their invitation had come not on parchment, but in verse, delivered by a masked girl with a painted smile:

“Come where the streets forget their names,
Where roots still twitch beneath the stones.
Tonight, we speak what must be known.”

They passed into an arched courtyard, overgrown with vine and time, where old flagstones formed a crude stage. Figures stood or sat quietly, wrapped in cloaks, faces shadowed by wide-brimmed hats or simple masks. No names were spoken. The air smelled of wet wood and candle wax, but underneath was something else—*soil*, old and deep.

Lady Semira Vanthel stood among them, cloaked in grey, a glint of polished steel at her wrist. Furg had seen her before—always at public hearings about land rights, always asking questions about records no one remembered filing.

“Be still,” a voice whispered.

From a shadowed archway emerged *Mirja the Masked*, dancer and wordsmith, her face covered in cloth stitched with script. She moved like silk through fog and began to recite:

“The stones remember deeper streets,
Paths older than the brick above.
A tree was carved where roots must grow—
Forgotten blood, forbidden love.”

The crowd listened in rapture.

Valak stepped forward when the call came for “any voice brave enough to add truth.” She lowered her hood and began a tale—not a lie, but a memory of her childhood, when her village’s founding story turned out to be false. She told of maps burned and names replaced, of altars rededicated, and the grief that came with knowing your ancestors were rewritten.

The silence that followed was heavy.

Lady Semira approached first, her face unreadable. “You’ve felt the erasure,” she said. “You’ve walked among lies. Then you understand why we do this.”

Furg and Tobi moved among the others, caught in whispered conversations. Two men spoke with noble tongues but wore dockworker’s boots. Another woman—clearly high-born by her rings—spoke of dreams where tunnels pulsed like veins and voices sang beneath the stones.

Old Bromo, a squat man with silver eyes and a cracked laugh, leaned close to Tobi.

“They ain’t just changing words, boy. They’re *raising roads*. I piloted the canal under the Silk Row last week, and the damn current bent sideways. Said someone was *singing to it*.”

“Who?” Tobi asked.

Bromo shrugged. “Ask the stone. It remembers better than me.”

After the performance, the party was pulled into a low room lit by a single lantern hanging over a stone map carved into the floor. Lady Semira stood above it.

“The history you know,” she said, “was chosen. Chosen by those who needed to *own* the truth. But beneath the city... there are older ways. Older *truths*. The tree you’ve seen—that’s not a sigil. That’s a *map*. Roots reaching downward. We’re trying to reawaken what Azir buried.”

“And the forgeries?” Furg asked, crossing his arms.

Semira’s gaze didn’t waver. “Corrections.”

Valak spoke carefully. “So what do you want?”

“To remember,” Semira said softly. “To *restore*.”

Outside, the rain had stopped. The stars were faint behind the cloudbreak.

As the party departed the Underterrace, Tobi muttered, “So they’re not trying to steal the city. They’re trying to *wake it up*.”

Furg spat. “Or dig up something better left dead.”

Valak looked at the carving of the tree again, etched in her memory now.

“If this is truth,” she said, “it’s been damned quiet a long time.”

Three days later, the message came.

It was a leaf of silvered paper slipped beneath their door at the guild—unmarked, unsigned. On it, only a phrase: “*The past waits beneath the candle vault. Midnight.*”

So at midnight, Furg, Valak, and Tobi found themselves beneath Azir once more, in the city’s ossified undergut where dust gathered like memory and the air carried the hush of things long buried.

A figure in a grey mask led them through twisting halls, down stone-cut stairs behind a long-forgotten tax office, and through a hidden door carved into the wall behind a shelf of false records. It opened into a narrow corridor lit by blue-glass lanterns. They descended wordlessly until the corridor widened into a sealed vault—a domed chamber lined with metal and stone, cold as judgment.

In the center of the chamber lay a vast map—etched into the floor, ceiling to floor to wall, city lines carved in gold filigree and pulsing softly beneath their boots. Azir, not as it was—but as it *had been*. Entire wards. Forgotten avenues. Canal veins that no longer ran, and a second ring of walls hidden below the earth.

And at the far end stood a throne of old gears and broken scrollwork.

Upon it sat *Archivist Noma*.

The construct's face was sculpted metal, smooth and expressionless. Its eyes glowed faintly, like dying coals. Strings of faded banners hung from its shoulders, fragments of ancient record seals and municipal crests. When it spoke, its voice was as dry as turning pages.

"Welcome," it said. "My charge is memory. My function is containment. You seek the truth."

Valak stepped forward, bow lowered, gaze firm. "Are the stories true? Was the city's history rewritten?"

"Yes," said Noma. "At the end of the Fourth Lineage Era, a schism erupted between ruling families. One faction attempted to erase others from the record. In return, their enemies retaliated—not with blade, but *with ink*. The city neared collapse."

"Civil war?" Tobi asked.

"On the verge. Clerics called it 'The Quiet Erasure.' A pact was struck. The guilds, the nobles, and the city's stewards agreed: the past would be *locked*, certain records redacted. A new civic narrative forged. Those who remembered were sworn to silence. I was built to guard that silence."

"And now someone wants it undone," Furg said.

"Yes," Noma replied. "The Society believes the old truths must be returned. That the city must know itself again, no matter the cost."

"And what's your view?" Valak asked quietly.

"I hold no view," Noma said. "But I will offer this: to restore the old record is to divide the city again. Land will be contested. Bloodlines disputed. Power will shift. Faith will break."

"But the truth will be known," Valak said.

Furg stood in silence, eyes scanning the map underfoot. His boot rested on a street that hadn't existed in three hundred years. His voice came low and grim.

"Truth's like fire. It warms. Or it burns."

They left the vault hours later, escorted in silence. No threats were spoken. No oaths demanded. Only one question remained:

What would they tell the Fighters' Guild?

Back at Murkar's, the hall was dim. Ragarok waited in the war room, a mug of cold ale in one hand, the fire low. He didn't rise.

"Well," he said, "what's the word? You want us to start chopping heads—or pretend this city's bones ain't twitching?"

Valak looked to Furg. Tobi stood quietly behind them, his hands clenched.

Furg stepped forward and placed a single item on the table: a rough charcoal rubbing of the hidden map beneath Azir.

Then he said, without ceremony or flourish, “It’s all true. The city’s built on a lie. But cutting it open now? It’ll bleed itself dry. We tell the Cartographers they’re right. And we tell them to bury it again—until Azir’s ready.”

Ragarok stared at the map. Then he took a long swig of ale and exhaled through his nose.

“Damn. Truth hurts more than any blade.”

He nodded once.

“Good work. You didn’t draw blood—and you still made the ground shake.”

The matter was closed. The job was done, party got paid 45 gp.

But as the party sat in the guildhall that night, mugs in hand and the storm outside building again, none of them spoke of victory.

Only silence.

And the roots of an old tree, still spiraling downward in the dark.

Blades in the Dark

The storm had passed when the summons came—short, sealed with the mark of the Council, handed directly to Ragarok’s fist.

He read it in silence, then bellowed across the guildhall. “Furg. Valak. Tobi. Get your gear. The city wants blood.”

Within the hour, the three were seated in the war room across from Guild Captain Toran Marh, a grizzled man whose armor was too scarred to shine and whose voice was a rasp honed by decades of command.

He unrolled a map of Azir, its belly lined with twisting channels—*the sewers*.

“The Thieves’ Guild has stopped hiding. Assassins killed two councilmen last month. Cursed relics have been moving through the underflows. Black market magic, blood-signed contracts, even whispers of necromancy. They’ve gone from pickpockets to *parasites*.”

He tapped a section of the sewer map marked “Sector 3 - Overflow Catch.”

“They’ve dug in deep. Reinforced tunnels, layered watchposts. Worse—some of their captains may be *channeling magic*. Nothing official, but it fits the pattern.”

Valak folded her arms. “And our job?”

“Infiltrate. Dismantle. Root them out. Quietly. We don’t need riots. We need results.”

Furg raised a brow. “Any reinforcements?”

“Just now the three of you. Council wants *discretion*. You get seen, we’ll deny the whole damn thing. But if any are needed later, we will provide city guards.”

Tobi scoffed. “Lovely.”

Before they departed, they met with *Scribe Malveris*, an old man hunched beneath three layers of robes and ink-stained sleeves. He led them down through the City Records Hall, past rows of forgotten deeds and sewer permits filed by the dead, until they reached an iron grate choked in rust.

Malveris inserted a brass key into the lock. “Old council escape route,” he muttered. “Haven’t opened it in sixty years. Try not to drown.”

The gate creaked open, releasing a foul breath of wet stone and rot.

They descended into the *Undercity*.

The first hour was uneventful—just the stench of time and sewage, slick floors, and dripping stone. Rats the size of cats watched from ledges, vanishing when the torchlight got too close.

Then, as they crossed a narrow stone bridge into a circular cistern chamber, it happened.

Valak raised a hand.

Whistles. Soft. Sharp.

“Ambush,” she hissed.

From the shadows, five figures burst forth—*sewer scouts*, lean and fast, clad in patchwork armor darkened with sludge. Blowguns hissed. Furg’s shield took a dart, the tip clinking off the metal.

Tobi wasn’t as lucky—a dart caught him in the side of the neck. He ripped it out with a curse and lunged forward.

Furg blocked two blades at once, swinging in a wide arc that cracked bone and sent one scout sprawling.

Valak rolled into cover behind a stone pillar and fired two arrows—both struck true, one through a knee, the other through an eye.

The thieves were quick, slipping between pillars and throwing knives from the dark. Tobi’s sword clanged off stone as he chased one through a collapsing arch.

Then a trap sprang.

A tripwire snapped and a pair of iron spikes dropped from the ceiling. Furg shoved Valak aside just in time—one spike grazed his shoulder, drawing blood but missing the bone.

“They’re *layered in here*,” he growled. “Every inch rigged to kill.”

They fought hard, brutal. Thieves screamed in the dark, blades clanged, boots slipped on algae-slick stone.

When the final scout fell, gurgling, Furg knelt and searched the body.

A scroll. Coded text. Beneath the lines, one phrase stood out—scrawled in red:

“Red Latch, Second Gate.”

Tobi spat blood onto the floor. “What in the damned name of all crypt gods is *that* supposed to mean?”

Valak took the scroll, squinting. “Red Latch... that’s not a name. It’s a marker. They’re guiding someone.”

Furg nodded grimly. “Then we follow it. Carefully.”

The sewer stretched ahead—wet, silent, hungry.

And somewhere, behind the next latch, the Thieves’ Guild waited.

The party moved deeper through the Undercity, guided by the message’s cryptic clue—“*Red Latch, Second Gate*.” The torchlight shimmered against dripping stone, casting long shadows that rippled like silent watchers along the curved tunnel walls.

They passed rusted grates and iron pipe valves, eyes sharp for anything marked.

Then Valak stopped.

“There,” she whispered.

Just ahead, on the left-hand wall, was a rusted hatch built into the masonry—at first glance no different from the dozens they’d passed. But streaked across its center was a smear of red paint, faded and flaking, but deliberate.

“Red Latch,” Furg said.

He took the wheel in hand and twisted. It shrieked in protest, but opened, revealing a narrow crawlspace that reeked of brine, iron, and old blood.

They crawled through and dropped into a larger chamber—colder, lined with ancient stone hooks and iron meat racks. The ceiling dripped condensation. What once might’ve been a butcher’s cold vault had been repurposed.

Bedrolls littered the floor. Empty crates and old weapon racks lined the walls. It was a *barracks*, and recently abandoned.

“Spread out,” Furg ordered, sword drawn.

In a corner, beneath an overturned bench, they found him.

A young thief, no older than twenty-five, his leg broken and face smeared with blood. He raised a knife with a shaking hand, but didn’t fight when Valak kicked it from his grip.

“Name?” she asked coldly.

“R-Rook,” he stammered, coughing. “Please, don’t gut me. I didn’t pick this fight—I just do watch duty.”

Tobi knelt beside him. “You’re bleeding. That leg’s gone if we leave you. So start talking.”

“Protection,” Rook said quickly. “You help me walk out of here alive, I’ll give you what you need.”

Furg glanced to Valak, who nodded. “He talks, he walks.”

Rook swallowed hard. “There are *four* captains. Each one controls a sector of the sewers. I only know two by name—Captain Vorl in the western line, and ‘The Rag-Eye’ in the south. They don’t trust each other, but Vorl—he’s the real muscle. Controls the poisoners and the smuggling lanes.”

Furg’s eyes narrowed. “Where’s Vorl now?”

“Don’t know. But he’s got a drop point called the *Butcher’s Drop*. Big stash, heavy guards. You go there, you’ll find leads—maybe worse.”

Tobi offered the thief a strip of cloth. “Tie your leg, stay hidden. We’ll come back for you. If you’re lying—”

“I’m *not*,” Rook said, eyes wide. “I want out of this mess.”

They moved on, Rook left behind with a promise and a knife within reach.

The Butcher’s Drop wasn’t far. The air changed as they approached—a heavier stench of rotting meat and sewage, undercut with something acrid. Poison.

They climbed down through a broken well shaft into a larger vault where water dripped from meat hooks strung with bloodied sacks. Old crates lined one wall, stamped with stolen guild marks. And standing guard—six thieves and cutthroats, all armored in mismatched leathers, armed with curved daggers, clubs, and iron nets dripping with toxin.

“Enforcers,” Tobi muttered. “This is no watch team.”

The rogues spotted them instantly.

The fight exploded in the dim.

One rogue hurled a net at Valak—she ducked and rolled aside, loosing an arrow that buried into the thrower’s chest. Another rushed Furg with a serrated blade, the edge glowing green with poison. Furg blocked, but the blade sliced across his gauntlet, biting into the skin beneath.

“Damn blade’s tipped!” he growled, kicking the thief backward and splitting him down the middle with a roar.

Tobi caught a club to the ribs, staggered, then stabbed upward under the attacker’s chin, twisting until blood sprayed the floor.

Another rogue flanked Valak—she spun, cracked a torch into his face, and drove an arrow through his chest at point-blank range.

One of the last tried to flee, but Furg hurled a rusted cleaver, catching the man between the shoulders. He crumpled, twitching.

The vault fell still.

Among the crates, they found blades, vials of poison, and black-market relics sealed in oilcloth. But the prize lay rolled in a wax-stamped ledger, found inside a locked iron case.

It listed *smuggling dates*, drop locations... and names.

At the top, scrawled in bold, elegant script: *Captain Vorl*.

Tobi whistled low. “Looks like we’re heading west.”

Furg nodded grimly. “Rook gave us the truth.”

Valak wiped her blade clean and slung her bow. “Now let’s see if Vorl gives us a war.”

The air above the Blackwater Channel stank of sulfur, oil, and wet iron. By dusk, the Fighters’ Guild had sent word to the city barracks—and when Furg, Valak, and Tobi arrived at the edge of the channel, they weren’t alone.

Fifteen city guards stood ready—armored in battered mail, spears in hand, short swords at their hips. Their captain, a gruff woman named Ser Halven, nodded to Furg with a grim smile.

“You three kicked the nest,” she said, eyeing the water below. “Now we burn the damn thing.”

They advanced along a crumbling stone path that hugged the sewer’s southern artery, lanterns bobbing in the gloom. Finally, they reached the old *smugglers’ gate*—a rusted iron arch above a runoff canal, choked with moss and chained tight. Makeshift barricades blocked the entrance—old crates, barrels soaked in pitch, jagged boards designed to bleed any who pushed too fast.

And atop it, torches burned in oil-pots. Fire traps. Close enough to explode.

“They’re waiting for us,” Valak muttered.

“They won’t wait long,” Ser Halven replied. “Positions.”

Just beyond the barricade, the passage narrowed and led onto a long, arched stone bridge—spanning a chasm of black water and centuries-old sewage runoff. And standing on that bridge, waiting, was *Vorl*.

He was taller than most thieves, robed in soot-dark leathers stitched with corded symbols, a brace of alchemical bombs strapped across his chest. Behind him, *twenty saboteurs*—flame-lit shadows armed with glass grenades, fire-drenched blades, and enough fury to turn the whole tunnel into an oven.

Vorl grinned.

“City rats!” he called, voice echoing across the channel. “Thought we’d burn quietly? *We are* the city now. You’re the old blood!”

Then he threw the first firebomb.

It exploded mid-air, a blossom of white-orange flame. Screams rose. Chaos broke like floodwaters.

The battle on the bridge began.

Guards surged forward, shields raised. Saboteurs hurled bombs, turning the bridge into a maze of flame and falling stone. Blades clashed, fire rained, and the *bridge began to crumble*.

“Move!” Furg shouted. “Bridge won’t last!”

Valak ducked low, loosing arrows through rising smoke. Two saboteurs fell from the bridge, screaming into the chasm. Tobi clashed with three at once, blocking one blade with his own and punching another over the edge.

Flames licked across the stone. Screams echoed. The bridge cracked behind them.

Furg charged through fire and slammed into Vorl, both of them tumbling into the center of the collapsing span. Vorl slashed at him with a hooked dagger, screaming curses in a language older than Azir. Furg took the cut to his ribs, grabbed the thief by the collar, and *headbutted him unconscious*.

“Got him!” he roared, dragging Vorl back as stone gave way beneath their feet.

With a final, deafening crack, the bridge collapsed—half of it falling into the dark below. But the party and half the guards made it across. The rest either retreated or fell in fire.

They bound Vorl in chains, scorched and cursing.

Valak crouched beside him, dagger at his throat. “Who are the *Underguild*?”

Vorl laughed, blood on his lips. “We’re just fingers. *They’re the fist*. You think I run this? I was just guarding the *door*.”

Furg pulled a satchel from Vorl’s belt—inside were maps, supply tallies... and a wax-sealed document stamped with the spiral-root sigil.

One word was scrawled in heavy ink:

“Thornhold Vault.”

Tobi read it aloud. “What is this?”

Vorl grinned, even bound. “That’s where the real thieves live. The Underguild. Beneath *Gravewater Drain*. But you won’t reach it alive.”

They left Vorl in chains, handed over to city guards.

Furg looked at the broken bridge behind them, smoke still rising.

Valak wiped ash from her cheek. “We’re going *under* the city next.”

Tobi groaned. “We’ve barely made it out of this alive.”

Furg stared at the map, jaw clenched. “Then let’s start dying better.”

The entrance to *Gravewater Drain* was hidden behind a broken mausoleum at the edge of Azir’s oldest cemetery—where the stone had cracked from time and neglect, and roots had pried open the earth like a wound. The graveyard was quiet, save for the low groan of wind dragging over rusted gates.

Valak found the hidden latch beneath a false slab. Furg forced it open, and a breath of stagnant air rolled up from below, reeking of mildew, blood, and death long steeped in water.

They descended.

Down into *ancient catacombs*—tunnels carved by hands long dead, now hijacked by the Thieves’ Guild and twisted into a haven. The path sloped downward through stone halls half-flooded with dark water. Bloated bodies floated in the shallows, tied to stones or caught on broken masonry, their mouths open as if still screaming.

Arcane glyphs pulsed along the walls—etched in red wax and rat bone, some glowing faintly with necromantic heat.

“They’ve been *building* this,” Valak muttered, arrow notched.

“They’ve been *breeding* it,” Furg corrected.

The ritual chamber opened ahead like a festering heart—an ancient ossuary turned into a theater of corruption. Bones lined the walls. Braziers burned green, casting sickly light on a

raised dais where a *cursed artifact* floated in midair—an orb of black glass wrapped in jagged silver bands, twitching with shadow.

Beneath it, five robed figures circled slowly, hands weaving through the air—*elite thief-casters* and their acolytes. At the center stood a tall, gaunt man in oil-dark robes—his skin inked with living glyphs that slithered across his arms.

The *Shadowbound Summoner*.

He chanted in a guttural tongue, words heavy with malice:

“Ex umbris surgat. In tenebris audiat. Corpus ratum, anima fracta.”

At his feet, dozens of rats twitched violently, eyes glowing red as black smoke coiled from the orb into their skulls.

Valak whispered, “They’re binding the sewers. *Every rat* in the undercity will be eyes and ears.”

“No time,” Furg growled. *“Break the damn ritual.”*

The acolytes saw them.

Battle erupted.

Three casters flung shadowbolts that exploded with bursts of blindness. Valak rolled, loosing arrows that buried into one acolyte’s chest. Tobi rushed the nearest with his sword raised, cleaving through robes and ribs.

The Summoner raised both hands. Chains of shadow burst from the floor, *snaring Furg* and dragging him toward the altar.

Furg snarled, breaking a chain with sheer force, then barreled forward and slammed into the dais, toppling a caster with his shield and snapping their leg beneath him.

The orb pulsed brighter.

A swarm of rats exploded outward—gnashing, biting, eyes glowing like embers.

Valak screamed as they swarmed her, gnawing at her boots, her thighs. She dropped to one knee and *fired blindly* into the horde.

Tobi leapt up onto a pile of bones and hurled a flask of fire oil. It shattered across the floor, flames rushing across fur and cloth.

The Summoner advanced, his shadow growing tall, blade of living darkness in hand. He struck at Furg, their blades clashing in a blur of steel and smoke.

“You think you’ve stopped the guild?” he hissed. “You’ve only seen its *tail*. Thornhold is the *head*.”

Furg bared his teeth and drove his sword straight through the Summoner's chest—then grabbed the cursed artifact and *smashed it against the stone altar*.

The orb cracked, then *screamed*—a high, keening shriek of broken spirit and undone power. It shattered into a thousand slivers, black smoke pouring from it like blood from a wound. The surviving rats fell still.

Silence followed. The chamber trembled.

One acolyte, half-burned and choking, crawled toward them. He grasped Furg's boot and whispered, lips torn and eyes wide.

"He... *waits in Thornhold*. And the guild dies... *only when he does*."

Then he died, bleeding from the ears.

Furg stood over him, breathing hard, blood still dripping from a dozen cuts. Valak limped forward, face pale.

Tobi leaned on the altar, coughing. "So... next stop... Thornhold Vault."

Furg nodded, wiping his blade.

"And this time, we finish it."

Thornhold Vault rose from the sewer depths like the broken ribcage of a long-dead titan—its stone doors jagged with rusted carvings, old dwarven glyphs now defaced with thieves' sigils and red-paint warnings. The air was dry here, unnaturally still, as if the ruin itself was holding its breath.

"This was once a treasury," Valak said, her fingers brushing the stone. "Now it's a tomb waiting to be sealed."

Furg tightened the straps of his armor. "Then let's hammer the lid shut."

They entered.

The corridors were narrow, winding through ruined dwarven halls now littered with bone fragments and stripped armor. Traps littered the path—pressure plates, dart grooves, illusion-warded doors that tried to loop the mind. They advanced slowly, cutting ropes, jamming locks, watching for shifting light and false steps.

Every inch was *prepared*.

Then came the final chamber.

It was once a vault of kings—now a throne of crime. Braziers burned green and low, casting long shadows over ledgers and stolen relics. Thick columns held up the vaulted ceiling, and at the far end stood *Gordas Malvane*—Guildmaster of the Thieves.

A grotesque, giant rat clad in finely fitted leather armor, gold rings looped through his pierced ears and a long red sash coiled across his back. His eyes gleamed with oil-slick intelligence.



He leaned lazily on a curved cane, behind which dozens of trained thieves lurked in the dark—and constructs made of bone, brass, and shadow crouched like waiting beasts.

“Well well,” Gordas purred. “The Ratslayers arrive.”

Furg raised his blade, but Valak held him back.

“Talk first.”

Gordas chuckled. “Always wise. Look—we’re not so different. You protect the city with blood and steel. I do it with secrets and silver. You think removing *me* ends the Thieves’ Guild? No. You only make more enemies. But stand down... and I can offer gold, influence—*power*.”

Tobi spat. “You offered Azir *poison*.”

Gordas’ smile faded. “So be it.”

He *snapped* his fingers. The chamber lit in fire and smoke.

Eight thieves lunged from the dark—swords gleaming, cloaks flaring. Traps triggered—flames burst from the floor, blades sprung from the walls. Animated constructs sprang to life, their limbs made of sawblades and rusted iron.

Furg met the first charge head-on, his shield ringing like a bell. He broke one thief's jaw with the rim, stabbed another through the gut, and took a blow to the ribs that sent him staggering.

Valak loosed arrow after arrow, weaving through shifting smoke and illusions—some figures flickered and vanished, others bled when struck.

Tobi fought side by side with Furg, cutting down a construct with a sweep of his blade, then kicking one thief into a spike trap that Gordas himself had laughed over moments earlier.

Gordas moved like shadow—dropping smoke bombs, casting illusions, vanishing between strikes. He reappeared near the ledger table, hurling daggers laced with venom and shouting commands in Thieves' Cant.

"You kill me and the *web unravels!*" he roared.

"You *are* the damn web!" Furg shouted back, slamming him through a pillar with a thunderous blow.

The second phase of the battle erupted—Gordas split into three illusions, each hurling fire and poison while the remaining constructs surged. Valak spotted the real one by the drag of his tail—shot through his knee and pinned him with a bolt.

Furg and Tobi finished the job together.

The real Gordas gurgled on his own blood, trying to rise. Furg stood over him, panting, sword slick.

"You should've stayed under the city," Furg muttered—and drove the blade through Gordas' chest.

The battle was over.

Around them, thieves lay dead. Smoke thinned. The vault was still.

In Gordas' personal chest, they found ledgers—meticulous and damning. Names of officials paid to look the other way, merchants running black-market relics, and foreign contacts with vested interest in Azir's slow collapse.

Back at the Fighters' Guild, Captain Toran Marh stood before the fire as the party returned, bloodied, bruised—but victorious. They got paid 160 gold pieces.

He looked over the ledgers, grimly nodding. "Damn good work. You did more than kill a guild—you tore the roots out."

He stepped forward and handed them a scroll—an official decree sealed with the Council's mark. "From this day forward, you carry your own sigil. You answer only to the Guildmaster, and the Council listens when you speak."

Furg opened it. On the parchment, etched in black ink:

“The Iron Roots of Azir.”

It spread like whisperfire.

In the alleys, the name was spoken in hushed tones—*not* of thieves, but of those who came from the dark and *dragged light in after them*.

And beneath the city, in the ruins and rot where secrets once ruled, silence finally held.

The guildhall’s dining chamber crackled with warmth and noise, the smell of roasted boar thick in the air. Long tables were stacked with trenchers of sliced meat, boiled potatoes, pickled roots, and stewed greens. Barrels of dark ale were tapped, and mugs clinked like quiet armor.

Furg sat at the head of one bench, tearing into a hunk of boar with greasy fingers. Tobi had already gone for seconds, scooping another ladle of potatoes onto his plate. Valak sat across from them, sipping her ale slowly, eyes scanning the firelight. Her bow leaned against the wall behind her, freshly restrung.

Ragarok entered then, a shadow against the hearth glow, dragging behind him a tall, scaled figure.

“Oi,” the guildmaster barked. “This scaly bastard’s your new shadow. Name’s *Vrexan*. Came up from the south swamps, bit of a fire-breather and he doesn’t bleed easy. Show him what side of the blade goes where.”

Vrexan gave a short nod, his scaled chin rising. His emerald eyes glinted above his leather jerkin, his mouth lined with small fangs. “I do not bleed easily. That is true. I have fought in swamps where even the worms bite.”

Furg gestured at the bench beside him. “Sit, then. Eat before you tell us your death tales.”

Vrexan sat, still watching everyone with a careful, lizardlike calm. He reached for a slab of boar and bit through the bone.

Tobi raised his mug. “So we’re getting new blood again, huh? Let’s hope you last longer than the last one. Poor Dremel didn’t even get to finish his first piss before he stepped on that trap.”

“I do not piss lightly,” Vrexan replied simply. “Tell me of yourselves.”

Furg grunted, leaned back, and pulled a carved wooden pipe from his belt. He packed it slow with pipeweed, then lit it with a sliver of flame from the hearth. Smoke curled around his beard as he spoke.

“I come from Farhun. Little dwarf village buried in hills no one bothers naming. Grew up hauling stone and chopping wood. My da raised me on boiled oats and hard truths. Came to Azir with five silver coins and a dream of steel. Now I dream of silence instead.”

He spat into the hearth—smoke hissed, fire cracked.

Tobi lifted his mug. “Well, if we’re spilling tales—I was a herder’s brat. Grew up chasing goats, dodging drunks, and learning to swing a stick at anything that moved too fast. Lost my brothers in a raid on the west marches. Thought if I joined the guild, I might learn to kill *better*. Still learning.”

Valak swirled her ale, looking into it like it held ghosts. “Born under the trees of El’Serra. My kin followed Mirith, the old light. But I questioned too much. Got told to leave—or be silenced. I wandered for a year, selling my bow where I could. Ragarok found me in a cellar pinning a ghoul to a wine cask with a broom handle and two arrows.”

They chuckled. Furg passed the pipe.

Valak waved it off. Vrexan took it, sniffed, then passed it on.

“And you?” Valak asked him. “What mud hole spat you out?”



Vrexan tilted his head. “I was born in the drake-warrens of Saezz. My people do not raise young. We survive or we die. I was taken by slave traders, sold to a merchant cult, and trained as a bodyguard. One night, I slit the cult leader’s throat with a shard of mirror and walked into the swamp. I found Azir. I was hungry. The guild gave me meat. Now I stay.”

Tobi blinked. “Well, that’s a damn story.”

Furg puffed his pipe, eyes half-lidded. “He’s got bones behind that scale. We’ll see how he swings.”

The fire popped. Mugs were drained and refilled. The boar was picked near to bone.

For now, the city was quiet. For now, there was food, ale, and smoke. And for warriors like them, that was the closest thing to peace they'd ever get.

Blades on the Road, Shadows in Mulhak

Morning light poured across the stone floor of the Azir Fighters' Guildhall, dust motes dancing in the air as Guildmaster Ragarok paced before the war table, a rolled parchment clutched in one scarred hand. His brow was low, his beard braided tight, and his eyes hard with something between annoyance and concern.

Furg, Tobi, Valak, and Vrexan stood ready, the smoke of breakfast fires still clinging to their clothes.

Ragarok didn't waste time.

"You're headed for Mulhak," he growled. "A merchant caravan's moving under guild protection—your job is to make sure it *gets there intact*. Six wagons. Exotic goods. Steel, potions, sealed crates from the High Quarters, the kind of stuff that gets bandits drunk on greed."

He slapped the parchment down. "But it's not just a delivery. You're to report to the Fighters' Guild chapter in Mulhak. Murkar's looking to expand presence there, and I want you to remind them what *our* blades look like. Don't embarrass me."

Furg gave a single nod. "Standard escort?"

Ragarok's mouth twisted. "Not exactly. The caravan's run by a half-orc named *Lirg*. Quiet type. Doesn't talk much, but knows his business. He hinted Mulhak's gone dirty—guild corruption, backdoor deals. So eyes open."

Later that day, outside Azir's northern gate, the party met Lirg.

He stood a head taller than Furg, with a thick neck, a dull iron breastplate, and a blunt sword strapped across his back like it belonged to someone much bigger. His skin was dark green, weathered and pocked from years of wind and sand. He spoke with a slow rumble that felt like stone settling.

"You're the Iron Roots?" he asked, not bothering with formality.

Tobi grinned. "What gave it away?"

Lirg stared at him a moment, then turned to inspect the six wagons lined up behind him—each reinforced with thick oak frames and stamped with noble seals. "We leave in an hour.

No fires at night. No unnecessary talk on the road. Mulhak's gotten... *dirty*. And I'm not just talking dust."

Valak narrowed her eyes. "Meaning?"

"Meaning keep your blades near," Lirg said, then walked off to speak with the drivers.

They traveled for two days without incident—across dry plains, through low scrub and along cracked roads bleached pale by sun. The air was quiet, the skies clear. In the evening, the caravan settled into a hollow beside a weathered rock outcrop, its edge sheltering them from the ever-present wind. Fires flickered in iron braziers brought for just this purpose, their light dancing across tired faces. The smell of roasting turnip stew and smoked goat mingled with dust and sweat. Furg and Tobi took their usual spots on a log near the fire, their boots off, comparing the relative merits of different iron rivets used in wagon hubs. Valak sat nearby, calmly polishing her blade, half-listening, half-dreaming beneath the stars. Vrexan crouched beside the fire, slicing dried fruit with claws surprisingly precise, occasionally glancing at the horizon.

Lirg hunched over a bowl, tearing at flatbread. "Trade's thinned west of the cliffs," he muttered. "Used to be six caravans a week between Azir and Mulhak. Now it's three, on a good month."

"Bandits?" asked Valak without looking up.

"Greed," Lirg said, shaking his head. "Bandits, tariffs, black-market deals. Too many people skimming the top and not enough watching the road."

Off to the side, one of the caravaners—a wiry halfling named Dando—was grumbling as he inspected a cracked wheel. "Split right through the rim," he called out. "Could use a wedge and resin if anyone's got hands not full of stew."

Tobi rolled to his feet, wiping his hands. "I'll give you a hand," he offered, grabbing a hammer from his kit. Furg waved him off with a grin. "Let him. He likes pretending he's a carpenter after two bites of food."

The fire popped and sparked, and for a time the group sat in easy quiet, the warmth of the blaze warding off the chill that crept in with the stars. A dog barked once from the edge of camp, and the wagons creaked gently in the settling earth.

The third day brought them to a narrow gorge, where the path cut through a sheer ravine of red stone.

Too quiet.

Valak stopped mid-step. "Movement."

From the cliffs above, dust stirred. Then came the sound—*hooves*.

Eight mounted bandits charged in from both ends—lean figures in mismatched armor, faces wrapped in cloth, sabers drawn. Two on the high ridge let loose rocks that crashed down across the road, pinning the rearmost wagon and cutting off retreat.

“Ambush!” Furg shouted.

The fight broke like a thunderclap.

Furg and Tobi surged forward. Furg took point, shield raised as a rider charged down the slope. The impact rang like an anvil—but Furg didn’t budge. He brought his axe down into the rider’s side, sending him spinning from the saddle.

Valak dropped to one knee behind a broken wheel and loosed arrow after arrow—each one biting into legs and necks. One bandit tried to flank; she dropped him before he reached the wagon.

Tobi scrambled up a rocky incline to face two riders cutting across the ridge. He used the slope to his advantage, knocking one from his horse with a heavy swing, then turned and kicked loose a boulder that crushed the legs of the second horse, throwing its rider screaming into the gorge.

Vrexan met one of the mounted attackers head-on—vaulted onto the saddle and *snapped the bandit’s neck* with a twist before throwing the corpse down to the canyon floor.

It was quick, bloody, and efficient.

By the time the last rider fled into the haze, the party stood firm, bloodied but unbowed.

Lirg came forward, pulling off his cloak and wiping blood from a dented helm.

“Not bad,” he said, watching Furg adjust his gauntlet. “You two,” he pointed at Furg and Tobi, “you fight like you remember your guild. I’ve seen men buckle at the first scream.”

He turned to Valak. “And you didn’t blink once. Cold heads save caravans.”

Valak offered only a nod, eyes still scanning the ridge.

Lirg grunted. “We make Mulhak in two days, gods willing. But watch yourselves. That was a test. They wanted to see what we’re worth.”

Furg spit blood from his lip and rolled his shoulder. “They found out.”

The caravan moved on, deeper into the wilds, where the dirt turned dark and the wind began to carry whispers from the Mulhak walls.

The sun had long dipped beneath the hills when the caravan circled its wagons near a crumbling watchtower—just a few broken stone teeth left jutting from the earth like the mouth of something ancient and long dead. The wind whispered through it, dry and restless, as if the tower remembered when it once watched for war.

Fires crackled low. Guards rotated on watch, quiet and tight-lipped. The next morning, air was too still.

Vrexan, crouched near the fire, his head tilted slightly, nostrils flaring, suddenly rose with a slow hiss.

“There is movement,” he said, tail flicking. “Beneath us.”

Furg stood, hand already at his axe. “Another ambush?”

Valak unslung her bow. “Maybe. Maybe worse.”

The ground didn’t shake, but the air shifted.

Then came the smoke—grey clouds rolled in unnaturally fast from the base of the tower ruins. Whistles pierced the air, followed by the thrum of bootfalls and the click of metal striking stone.

They were surrounded.

From the tower’s half-buried foundation and the scrub beyond, ten figures emerged—lean and fast, armed with curved blades, dressed in black, with pouches that rattled with caltrops. Trained jackals snarled beside them, lean, fanged, and blood-hungry.



Smoke bombs burst near the campfire, choking the air and turning the light into a flickering hell.

“Strike now!” one thief shouted. “No survivors!”

The fight was chaos wrapped in smoke.

Tobi stumbled on caltrops and rolled aside as two jackals leapt for his throat. He slammed one aside with his shield, blade flashing to cut the second across its ribs.

Furg met three at once—deflecting blades, taking a dagger in the shoulder, then driving his axe into the chest of a thief who tried to flank. His roar split the night as blood spattered the fire, making it hiss and dim.

Valak fought from behind a wagon, arrows flying into shadows. She could barely see her targets but heard the thud of bodies hitting earth.

One thief tried to circle behind her—only to be tackled by Vrexan, who drove the thief to the dirt and bit clean through his throat.

A jackal lunged for Lirg. The half-orc caught it midair, slammed it to the ground, and crushed its skull with his knee. His blade came up, parried a strike, and impaled the attacker on a broken fence post.

When the smoke cleared, the last thief was gasping, bleeding from a gash in the side. He tried to crawl, but Furg stomped down on his wrist and yanked something from his belt—a ring.

Simple at first glance.

But when turned to the firelight, it revealed a carved sigil: a red spider, its legs made of intertwining silver threads.

Lirg froze at the sight.

“Damn it,” he muttered. “Red Weavers.”

Valak looked up, eyes narrowed. “You know them.”

Lirg nodded, grim. “Didn’t think they’d reach this far. But that ring confirms it.”

He dropped into a squat, wiping blood from his arm.

“In Mulhak, the Weavers run the black markets—spices, contraband steel, even relics from old ruins. Quiet, organized. Lethal. Recently, they’ve started sniffing around my warehouses. ‘Losing’ shipments. Harassing my workers. I didn’t say anything to Murkar’s Guild yet... but if they’re hunting my caravan, it’s worse than I thought.”

Furg crouched beside him. “You think it’s a message?”

“It’s a warning. And maybe a test.” Lirg looked around the dark, the bodies, the jackals still twitching. “When we reach Mulhak... I need your blades. I’ll take you to the warehouse myself. You see what’s happening. Murkar will want to know.”

Tobi wiped soot from his face. “Guess we’re not just escorts anymore.”

Valak kicked a caltrop into the fire, where it sizzled and sparked. “We weren’t ever just escorts.”

The fire burned lower. The dead were dragged, the jackals dumped, and the tower watched on—silent, crumbling, and old enough to remember when darkness wasn’t so organized.

Morning would take them to Mulhak.

And Mulhak was waiting.

The city of Mulhak emerged from the hills like a beast built of brick and soot. Its skyline was jagged with chimneys and smokestacks, its alleys draped in shadow and coal-dust. Men moved like ants across steel walkways and under iron cranes, carts rattled with ore and flame, and the air burned the throat after just a few breaths.

“Smells like profit and secrets,” Furg muttered, pulling his cloak tighter.

Tobi coughed. “Smells like someone’s been burning their dead in the furnace.”

They moved through the streets with Lirg leading, the caravan trailing behind. Beyond the haze loomed the Mulhak Fighters’ Guild—a fortress of slate stone and riveted metal. It lacked the elegance of Azir’s columns. This place was built for siege, not spectacle.

At its great iron doors, they were stopped by two guards in chainmail dyed black from soot. A moment later, the doors opened with a groan that sounded like groaning steel—and Murkar stepped through.

He stood half again as tall as Furg, his shoulders broad as an anvil bench. A steel jaw clamped over the lower half of his face, fused to his skull with bolts and iron bonework. His eyes were small, sharp, and unfriendly.

But he took one look at Lirg, then at the party, and nodded.

“If Lirg trusts you,” he growled, voice like a forge, “you’re in.”

He turned without ceremony, leading them inside the fortress where walls bore dents from weapon drills, and every second person seemed to have a scar worth its own song.

They sat in a windowless war room lit by wall torches. Murkar dropped a map on the table and stabbed it with a steel finger.

“The nobles are turning. Lady Velra Kint wants to gut our charter—replace fighters with leash-dogs in silk. Private enforcers. House-blessed thugs. They don’t like us, because we answer to no coin and no crest.”

Valak leaned forward. “You think they’re tied to the Red Weavers?”

“I *know* they’re using the chaos,” Murkar said. “And they’re not alone. Lirg’s warehouse was hit two nights ago. Workers taken. One found floating in the acid ditch with his teeth gone. We think the others are alive. Being kept. Questioned.”

Lirg looked grim. “The Weavers don’t kill unless they need to. They unmake people. I want them found.”

Tobi cracked his knuckles. “Let’s get to work, then.”

The trail led them to Mulhak’s docks—blackened piers and half-sunken boats, the water thick as stew. Warehouses loomed over the shallows, boarded-up sailhouses now used for backdoor trade. Locals wouldn’t talk, but one drunk dockhand whispered of a *shuttered sailhouse* where men with spider rings came and went at dusk.

They approached at sundown.

The building was rotted on the outside—wood warped, nails rusted. But inside, the Weavers had made their nest.

Valak peeked through a crack in the planks.

“Seven smugglers. Two more near the rear wall—crossbows. Could be traps.”

Furg grunted. “Burn the rot out.”

They kicked the door in.

The smugglers reacted fast—drawn blades, shouted alarms. Two saboteurs on a balcony fired repeating crossbows, bolts raining down in rapid bursts. One lobbed a *firebomb* that exploded against the wall, sending splinters and flame across the floor.

Tobi rolled through the smoke, came up beneath a crate, and drove his blade into a smuggler’s thigh before slamming his fist into the man’s jaw.

Furg crashed through a stack of barrels, using one as cover as bolts zipped past his head. He hurled a spear through a saboteur’s chest and dragged down another with a hook chain.

Valak moved like smoke—her arrows found throats and eyes, dropping targets before they could scream.

Vrexan sprinted across the rafters and *tackled* one saboteur off the balcony, both of them crashing through crates. The saboteur never stood again.

Fire spread.

One smuggler broke and fled—Valak clipped him through the knee, dragging him back by his collar.

When the last body hit the floor, smoke choked the room.

In a side crate, bound and bruised, they found one of Lirg’s missing workers. Barely conscious. Covered in welts.

They also found maps—tunnels, schedules, a list of encrypted goods. All marked with a red spider sigil.

Furg stared down at the smoke-choked room and the blood pooling near the door.

“Looks like Mulhak’s got its own web.”

Valak checked the prisoner’s pulse. “Still breathing.”

Tobi lifted the crate of papers. “We’ve got proof. Murkar’s going to want this.”

Outside, the wind blew across the docks, thick with salt and ash. The sailhouse crackled behind them, firelight licking the dark.

Mulhak wasn’t just dirty.

It was poisoned.

Mulhak’s shadows deepened in tone and weight after the rescued warehouse worker finally spoke, lying pale beneath a wool blanket, eyes sunken with fear more than pain.

He whispered what he’d overheard between blows.

Lady Velra Kint was bribing local gang leaders and Red Weaver bosses to sabotage trade routes not under her control. She wanted to weaken Murkar and the Fighters’ Guild by disrupting their income, starving their support. Worse, she had a plan—stage a massacre in the market square using mercenaries dressed in guild armor, then claim the guild had gone rogue. Once that story spread, she’d have the legal grounds to force in her private enforcers.

Furg sat on a barrel, jaw clenched. “She wants blood to turn the tide.”

Valak leaned against the doorframe. “We stop the massacre, or the guild burns with the market.”

That night, they tracked whispers to an ironworks in the slag quarter—long shut down, now glowing faintly through warped shutters. Inside, they found an illegal forge belching smoke. A dozen freshly hammered guild seals lay cooling on a rack, while piles of forged tabards and fighter-grade armor sat in crates marked for delivery.

Tobi ran his hand across a painted sigil.

“They’re going to wear us like skin.”

In the back room, they found forged identification tokens and a scribbled note: “Meeting confirmed – agent will deliver final schedule to Dross Cellar.”

Vrexan’s tail flicked.

“Trap?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Furg said. “We spring it our way.”

The Dross Cellar was a ruined wine house on the edge of the noble quarter, all dust and collapsed stone. They crept through the cellar window at midnight, found a space behind stacked casks, and listened.

Two voices.

One low and sharp—clearly a noble’s steward, discussing payment terms, city patrol patterns, and “placement of the flame barrels.” The other was rasping and amused: a Red Weaver boss named Kelran who laughed at the idea of a slaughter in public.

“Fake uniforms. Screaming crowds. And the guild takes the blame,” Kelran said. “Velra will be hailed as a savior. She gets her laws passed. We get full access to the lower roads.”

“And Murkar?”

“Discredited. Removed. The chain breaks at the throat.”

That was enough.

Before dawn, the party was already at the market square, hidden in alleys and rooftops. Merchants set up stalls. Children darted between barrels. It was peaceful—for the last time.

Just before the sun crested the eastern spires, ten armored figures approached from the forge road. They wore tabards of the Fighters’ Guild, steel gleaming, weapons sheathed.

Too clean. Too crisp. And their boots didn’t match.

Furg growled. “Those boots don’t see drills.”

Valak loosed the first arrow—straight into a knee. The man screamed and dropped. The crowd scattered.

The fight was on.

Fake fighters drew blades, two hurled firepots toward a spice stand. Tobi dove and kicked one aside before it ignited. Vrexan charged straight in, buckler raised, spear thrusting in perfect, vicious rhythm—he skewered one through the chest and spun to parry another.

Valak rained arrows from a rooftop. Furg met the brunt, smashing two down with his axe and dragging a third from his saddle.

The last three tried to flee, but the crowd—now screaming and furious—boxed them in. Furg tackled one into a produce stall. Blood and cabbages spilled in equal measure.

One lived.

They dragged the lieutenant into an alley. His arm was broken, his face bloodied. He said nothing—until Furg pulled a wax-sealed letter from his breastplate.

Inside were instructions, perfectly penned.

“Confirm success. Deliver seal fragments to Lady Velra’s steward for public inquiry. Payment upon discreditation of Murkar.”

Valak stared at the signature.

It bore Velra’s sigil.

“No more smoke,” Tobi muttered. “We’ve got her.”

Vrexan cleaned his spear on a thief’s cloak.

“She planned fire. She will burn in it.”

Back at the guild, the wind was changing.

The skies above Mulhak swirled with smoke and orange haze the morning Murkar called the party into the war hall. He stood by the brazier, the flames casting flickers across the steel plate that replaced his lower jaw. His voice was low, but the heat behind it was unmistakable.

“You’ve brought the proof. You’ve stopped the slaughter. Now you get the last word.”

He unrolled a scroll bearing the guild’s crest, stamped with a black iron sigil.

“Full sanction. No hesitation. Infiltrate Velvet Stone Manor. Expose her treason or end her reach by the blade. If she dies, the nobles scramble. If she’s dragged before the council, they bleed under public shame. You choose the cut.”

Tobi tightened his belt. “She’s already drawn steel on the city. We’re just closing the wound.”

Lirg met them at the manor’s edge—his hand on the pommel of a blade he hadn’t drawn in years.

“She won’t go down quiet. She’s got mercenaries in there paid better than we’ll ever see, and they’re loyal. Not to her—just to coin. But that’s worse in a fight.”

The manor stood like a crown of pale marble above Mulhak’s rot, its columns veined with black ore, its banners hanging like silk lies. Behind its walls: secrets, steel, and fire.

They broke in just after midnight.

Traps were the first threat—thin wires laced with razor hooks, poison darts in carved paneling, pressure tiles that dropped blades from chandeliers. Vrexan led, his lizard eyes perfect in the dark. He disarmed three before they reached the first atrium.

That’s where the first mercenaries came.

Five heavy enforcers in plated mail, moving like wolves with warhammers. Behind them, two mage-duelists—one fire, one shadow—chanting from mirrored positions. A coordinated strike.

Furg charged the center line, catching a hammer on his shield and driving the edge of his axe up through the attacker's chin. Tobi flanked right, engaging two enforcers in brutal close quarters. Valak dodged upward along a marble banister and sent arrow after arrow into weak points in the mercenaries' joints.

Vrexan caught the fire mage mid-cast with a spear to the thigh, then closed in and silenced him with three fast strikes, buckler snapping bones as he moved. The shadow mage vanished in smoke—only to reappear beside Valak. She turned and shot him through the heart without blinking.

By the time the last mercenary fell, the marble floor was stained with blood and alchemical oil.

They pushed through winding corridors, past stolen relics and velvet hangings—until they found Velra herself in her private court. A cold chamber of black glass and silver statues.

She stood at the far end, flanked by two more guards she did not command to attack. Her eyes held no fear.

"I see Murkar sends killers in place of law," she said.

Furg stepped forward. "You staged a massacre. Tried to turn the city on itself."

"I tried to save it," Velra said. "From his rot. You think guilds are honor? They're bought, same as coin. But I don't want a war."

She raised a sealed letter, heavy with gold trim.

"Exile. Sealed travel orders. Twenty thousand in coin. Leave. Walk away. Let history call it a dispute among nobles."

Valak stared her down. "You tried to bury the city. Now it remembers your name."

Velra's final guards drew blades. The fight was brief—and bloody.

Velra tried to flee through a secret passage. Vrexan caught her halfway down the escape tunnel, spear pressed to her throat.

"You lost," he said.

They dragged her to the guild in chains.

Murkar stood tall before the council, throwing forged seals to the ground and slamming Velra's bloodied crest onto the table.

"The guild stands. The city's veins will not be bled dry by silk."

Lirg reclaimed his dock crews and swept the Weavers from his holdings with city sanction. Trade lines opened again. The black market lost its shadowed grip.

That night, the party stood in Mulhak's great hall, the forge fires glowing behind them.

Murkar presented each with a badge—carved from blacksteel and set with stone.

“The Iron Roots,” he said, “have taken hold here too.”

Furg raised a mug. Valak nodded silently. Tobi grinned like he'd won a bet. Vrexan didn't speak—just gripped his badge and stared into the flames.

Outside, the city exhaled.

And in the alleys, the name Iron Roots was whispered again.

Tracking Rili

The task came by courier—a village boy too skinny for his boots, who handed over the letter with shaking hands and said only, “It's the halfling Rili, sirs. They think she's gone missing in the woods.”

Murkar read it, growled something under his breath, and turned to the party.

“She's from the outer crofts. Good head on her, honest work. Went picking mushrooms in Fereg three days back. Didn't return. If it's bandits, you'll handle it. If it's something worse, handle that too. Don't come back empty.”

By morning, the party were walking the cracked stone path east, backpacks loaded with rations, flint, salve, and four vials of healing draught clinking in Furg's satchel. Vrexan carried rope and extra water. Tobi had the map. Valak scouted ahead.

It took half the day to reach the edge of Fereg Forest, where the birch trees leaned in low and the moss clung wet to bark like old flesh. Shadows stretched long even at noon, and no birds sang within.

“She came this way?” Valak asked, kneeling near the twisted roots of an old oak.

Tobi knelt too. “No drag marks. No signs of struggle. But the ground's too soft to tell much.”

Vrexan crouched, pressed his palm to the earth. His tongue flicked out once, twice. He sniffed the air, moved forward, sniffed again. “Female scent. Halfling. Faint. Muddled by old rain. But it goes east.”

They followed.

The trail wove through narrow deer paths and shallow glades. Hours passed. The sun dimmed behind leaf canopy. The scent faded, sharpened, faded again.

Then Vrexan stopped.

“Armor. Oil. Iron.”

They heard it too. Footsteps, measured and slow.

From the brush ahead, six skeletal figures emerged—tall creatures in fractured plate mail, symbols scratched from their armor, sun emblems defaced with jagged lines. Their eyes were hollow, their swords dark with rot.



“Vowshattered,” Valak hissed. “Fallen knights. They used to serve temples. Now they serve nothing.”

No words were spoken. The paladins raised their blades.

The fight struck like a hammer.

Furg met the first charge, axe smashing into a rusted shield that burst apart. He ducked a holy flail, rolled to the side, and cleaved into the paladin’s side. Bone cracked.

Valak loosed arrow after arrow—one bounced off armor, but another struck true between the shoulder plates.

Tobi took two on at once, blades clashing in the underbrush. One clipped his arm, but he turned the other aside and kicked him back into a thorn bush, where Valak finished the job.

Vrexan danced between them with spear and buckler, parrying a longsword and stabbing low, then high—his final strike drove through the neck seam of a snarling knight who fell twitching in the ferns.

One of the paladins raised a corrupted prayer, his voice like rust on stone, but Furg hurled his axe into the man's mouth mid-chant.

Silence fell. The forest breathed again.

The party leaned against trunks and mossed stones, catching their breath.

Furg retrieved his pipe, packed it with dry leaf, lit it, and took a long drag. The smoke curled above his head as he spat once into the underbrush.

“Didn’t expect godless knights out here.”

Tobi ripped a bandage and wrapped his arm. “Maybe they’re not godless. Maybe they’re praying to something that answers.”

Valak sat cross-legged, biting into a strip of dark bread. “Don’t give it a name. That’s how it finds you.”

Vrexan crouched in the dirt again, sniffing. “Rili’s scent continues. Fresh now. She was taken past here.”

Furg blew a long stream of smoke and passed the bread around. “Then we eat, we drink, and we keep walking.”

They ate in silence for a time, chewing hard crust and washing it down with cool ale from a shared flask. The forest didn’t feel like it was watching anymore. It felt like it was waiting.

When the last ember died in the bowl of Furg’s pipe, they stood again.

“Let’s find her,” he said.

And they vanished into the trees.

Rainwater trickled from broken stone as the party stepped through the moss-blanketed arch of the old ruin. Thick vines clung to shattered walls like veins, and faint glyphs still lingered beneath the green—symbols long forgotten, half-drowned in dirt and time. At the center of the ruin rose a collapsed tower, the bones of what may once have been a church, or a throne.

Vrexan crouched low, tongue flicking.

“She passed through here. The scent leads below.”

The party approached a set of crumbling stairs, slick with moss and riddled with cracks. A chill rose from beneath, like exhaled soil. Valak struck a flint and lit a torch. The flame flared weakly, orange and trembling against the green-black gloom.

They descended.

The tunnel below was older than the ruin above. Stone blocks arched overhead, warped and uneven, seams bloated with creeping roots. It smelled of rot, of wet bark and something floral—but wrong, like perfume spilled over a corpse.

At the first junction, they took the left path, following where the moss thickened.

A chamber opened before them—circular, ringed with crumbling columns. At its center grew a tree from the stone floor, gnarled and hollow. And from around it, five figures turned to face them.

They wore the shapes of men, tall and skeletal, their flesh wrapped in bark, their joints bursting with vines and strange mushrooms – Mosslord Regents. Crowns of twisted thorn and petal crowned their heads. Their eyes glowed faintly green, and their limbs moved with the slowness of roots pushing through earth.



They raised their arms and spoke as one, a voice like wind through dead branches:

“You walk where the memory lives. This place is not yours.”

Furg readied his axe. “Neither’s the halfling you took.”

They raised their hands—and the fight began.

Roots erupted from the ground, grasping for legs and ankles. Furg was nearly dragged under but hacked free with two heavy strikes. One Regent moved in silence, its bark-arm forming into a blade of thorn—it swung at Tobi, carving across his side. Blood sprayed.

Valak loosed arrows, but where the Regents should have bled, flowers bloomed. One staggered as a shaft pierced its chest—only to bend backward unnaturally, releasing a cloud of pale spores that made Valak stumble, eyes watering.

Vrexan spun through the chaos, spear dancing. He jabbed into one Regent's gut—bark split, revealing pulsating green pulp inside. The Regent shrieked without mouth or lungs, swinging blindly.

Tobi regained footing, stabbing upward through a Regent's chest, anchoring it to a stone. It writhed and broke apart into vines that slithered away, leaving only a hollow mask behind.

Furg met the largest of them head-on. The Regent raised both arms and whispered in a voice that shook the marrow—Furg hesitated, stunned by the weight of time itself, and vines wrapped around his arms. But he bellowed, tore free, and buried his axe in the Regent's face with a roar.

The Regent didn't fall. It collapsed into itself, mushrooms blooming from its eyes and mouth, choking on its own decay.

Two remained. One summoned a writhing knot of roots from the ceiling—Valak shot the growth mid-air, and Vrexan drove his spear through the final Regent's neck from behind.

In moments, the room fell still.

The roots slowly receded. The air lightened. And all that remained of the Regents were heaps of rotted flora and decaying crowns.

Furg leaned against the wall, wiping blood from his jaw. "Damn things didn't bleed. Just kept blooming."

Valak coughed, wiping spores from her lips. "They weren't alive in any way we know. That was the forest's memory, lashing out."

Tobi sat down hard. "If they were guarding something, it's got to be deeper in."

Vrexan sniffed the air again. "Rili. Still below. Close now."

They rested a moment—Furg packed his pipe and lit it with a spark off Valak's torch. He smoked in silence, spitting into the mossy floor as the others passed bread and water.

"Next time," Tobi muttered, "I vote for a damn city job."

Furg exhaled a plume of smoke.

"No such thing as easy gold."

They rose again.

And walked deeper into the roots.

The tunnels narrowed, the walls slick with condensation and strung with cords of old root. Every footstep echoed like breath in a tomb, and the deeper the party went, the colder the air grew—no wind, no light, just the faint scent of moss, blood, and something sterile.

They stepped into a long chamber carved from ancient stone, where ribs of blackened bone arched like failed architecture along the ceiling.

Then, from the dark emerged eight twisted figures unfolded from the walls and corners, their bodies rippling like clay still being shaped—Fleshweaver Hosts, each one a lurching amalgam of sinew and stitched muscle, veins pulsing visibly beneath transparent skin. Extra mouths opened on arms, necks, even torsos—some whispering, some screaming, one clicking out seconds in an endless monotone.



One voice begged softly, “Please... help me...”

Another, deeper, hissed, “What color is your soul?”

A third, calm and sharp, said, “Twenty-two seconds until hemorrhage.”

Then they lunged.

Valak's first arrow hit the chest of the nearest, but it absorbed the shaft into its skin, reshaping the wound into a maw that spat the arrow back. It grazed her shoulder as she rolled aside.

Furg charged in with a roar, axe cleaving into the thigh of one Host—tissue split, muscle writhed like worms. The thing bled, but didn't fall. Instead, it struck with a limb that shifted mid-motion from a hand into a sharpened bone-blade, carving across Furg's ribs.

Vrexan met two Hosts at once, his spear lancing through one's eye while his buckler deflected another's clawed strike. One Host latched onto him, trying to graft its hand into his skin—he bit through its tongue before spinning free, leaving blood and cartilage behind.

Tobi fought hard, slamming his sword into kneecaps and throats, but one Host raked its elbow across his stomach, leaving a wide, shallow gash. He shouted in pain, but held his ground, booting the creature back into a wall with force.

Valak circled, firing shot after shot into soft tissue—each bolt met with some obscene transformation. She finally drove one shaft into a Host's secondary spine, and it collapsed with a gasp of five different voices at once.

Furg finished another by cleaving its head off—but the thing kept moving, its arms grasping blindly until Vrexan severed its spine with a precise thrust.

In time, breathless and bleeding, the party stood victorious.

Flesh, both theirs and not, stained the stone floor. The Hosts twitched and fell still—unfinished ideas finally silenced.

Tobi slumped against a wall, pulling a vial from his belt. "That's the worst damn thing I've ever fought."

Furg nodded, blood leaking from a cut on his arm. "They weren't just fighting. They were learning."

Each party member drank a healing potion, the bitter fluid burning down their throats but sealing cuts and steadying pulses.

Valak looked ahead—three tunnels branched in different directions.

"We need to pick fast. The longer we wait, the colder her trail gets."

Furg wiped blood from his beard and unscrewed the cap of his waterskin. "It's not water," he muttered before taking a deep pull of ale. "We've come too far to wander."

Vrexan crouched, sniffed the air, then bent down and licked the floor. His eyes narrowed.

"She passed through here. Right tunnel. Sweat, mushrooms, fear. Still fresh."

They nodded and moved.

But just as Valak stepped through the threshold, a snap echoed from above.

A massive log, fitted with rusted nails and vines, dropped from the ceiling with terrifying speed. It slammed into her side, sending her flying across the tunnel. She hit the wall hard, crumpling in a heap, torch spinning away into the dark.

“Valak!” Furg bellowed, rushing to her.

Tobi knelt beside her. “She’s out cold. Still breathing. Damn near shattered her ribs.”

They cleared the debris and laid her flat, propped against the wall. Vrexan placed a wet cloth over her head, unmoved but careful.

They waited in the stillness for thirty long minutes.

At last, she stirred.

Furg handed her the waterskin. “Drink this. Or don’t. It’s mostly ale.”

Valak sipped, winced, and whispered, “Tastes like pipe ash.”

Tobi laughed with relief. “That means it’s working.”

Vrexan stood again, gaze fixed down the right-hand tunnel. “We are close. I smell more blood. And fear.”

Furg helped Valak to her feet.

“Let’s end this,” he said.

And into the dark they walked, together.

The tunnel led into a chamber colder than the rest. Stone arched high above, choked with roots, and the air shimmered with a faint, unnatural light. A circle of half-burned candles ringed a crude altar of cracked stone in the center of the room.

Upon it lay naked Rili—pale, and unmoving. Her arms and legs were bound tightly, and dark ink covered her skin in jagged, ritualistic shapes, her big breasts heaving under the candle light. Her mouth was gagged with cloth. The marks across her chest and shoulders pulsed faintly under the candlelight, etched in a script none of the party could read. Her eyes were wide and filled with tears.

Standing beside her, draped in tattered silk and broken mirror fragments, was a Mirror-King.

His body shimmered like wet glass, but his face was shifting—first Furg’s, then Valak’s, then something twisted and proud that bore the echo of a crown once worn. He smiled without warmth and spoke in a voice that flickered between them all.

“She is mine now. I have seen her perfect reflection, and she fits. Leave, and forget. This is not your story.”

Rili whimpered, tears cutting through the grime on her cheeks.

Furg stepped forward, axe in hand. “You picked the wrong girl. And the wrong damned tunnel.”

The Mirror-King shifted. His chest splintered into a mirrored surface, reflecting each of them—but not as they were. In Furg’s reflection, his beard was singed, his face twisted by failure. In Valak’s, her bow splintered and her eyes were filled with regret. Tobi saw himself limping, forgotten. Vrexan’s reflection was missing entirely.

“See yourselves,” the Mirror-King hissed, “and see your end.”

Then he attacked.

Blades of broken glass erupted from his arms, whirling with uncanny speed. He moved like smoke, like shattered light, dancing between them. Valak loosed an arrow, but it was caught mid-flight and sent spinning back. It glanced off her head—blood flowed down her temple as she dropped to one knee, stunned.



Tobi rushed forward and swung—his sword clanged against mirrored bone. The King retaliated with a vicious backhand, and the crunch of bone echoed. Tobi cried out as his fingers broke and one foot twisted unnaturally beneath him, blood pooling from a torn boot.

Furg met the King with a shield raised, clashing with brute force. His axe struck home once, twice—but on the third swing, the Mirror-King pulsed with inner light and released a scream that cracked the stone. Furg fell hard, unconscious, his sword skidding across the floor.

Vrexan struck next, fast and low, driving his spear into the King's side. There was no blood—just a shiver, a fracturing ripple—and the King screamed in Valak's voice: "You failed them all!"

"I fail nothing," Valak muttered, even with blood clouding her vision.

She rose, drew a final arrow, and with a steady hand, aimed not at the King's body—but the faint mirror at his core.

She fired.

The arrow struck, and the mirror shattered.

The Mirror-King howled. The voices fell silent. His form buckled and cracked, shards falling like glass rain. He twisted in on himself, dissolving into light, dust, and whispered regrets.

Then there was only silence. Party collected 160 gold from the Mirror-Kings body.

Valak stumbled to Rili and cut her free. Furg groaned, waking slowly, bruised but alive. Tobi leaned against a wall, gripping his ruined hand. Vrexan stood watch, eyes alert.

Rili sat up, clutching her arms, shaking.

"Thank you," she whispered, her voice hoarse. "I was... I was just looking for mushrooms. Then I saw him. The mirror. I couldn't look away."

She reached for a small basket, half-filled with forest mushrooms, still intact at the altar's base. "He kept doing things. Spells. I saw visions—cities burning. Demons in the streets of Mulhak. I don't know if it's real, or what he made me see."

Furg took his flask of ale and handed it to her. "You'll live. That's real enough."

Valak offered her cloak, helping Rili cover herself. "You're safe now. We'll talk about the visions later. Right now, we walk."

Tobi chuckled through the pain. "Better than lying around for another trap."

They lit a new torch, and one by one, turned back into the tunnel, guiding Rili with them. Behind them, the altar crumbled. The candles died.

And the shadows left with the Mirror-King.

The tunnel twisted onward, damp earth pressing close on all sides. After what felt like hours in the dark, the party stepped into a vaulted room cloaked in cobwebs and dust. Crumbling shelves stood tall and crooked, their surfaces packed with mold-rimmed tomes and rotting scrolls. A forgotten library, buried deeper than memory.

Furg stepped forward, brushing dust from a thick, iron-clasped volume. The cover read in flaking gold leaf: Canticles of the Veiled Sepulcher.

He opened it slowly, voice low as he read aloud.

“This place... it was once the Sanctum of the Sable Flame, a church built atop the graves of kings. They sealed the catacombs not for sanctity, but to trap something beneath—something whispered as The Hunger Below the Crown.”

Valak peered over his shoulder. “So we’ve been walking over royal bones.”

Furg flipped pages. “Listen to this. 'King Vaelus the Pale, who spoke to dreams and starved himself to death after declaring he saw the mouths of gods.' And here—'Queen Athrella the Black-Eyed, buried in her mirror dress, so her sins might reflect into the earth forever.'”

Vrexan sniffed the air. “No bones left here now. Only rot.”

They moved on.

In the next chamber, barely a step inside, a grinding snap echoed—and the floor gave out beneath them.

The stone dropped like a snapped jaw.

They fell.

The impact stole breath. Dust flew. Groans echoed in the pitch.

When they stood, they found the walls no longer carved stone, but earth and root, pulsing slightly as though breathing. The air was foul, warm and wet, smelling of mulch and decay. Their torches barely held flame.

Valak clutched her head. “Where the hells are we now?”

Furg spat blood. “Below everything.”

They walked, no map to guide them—only instinct, and dread.

Then they entered a chamber of stone and statues, the air thick as stew. At its center sat a throne grown from bone and bark, and upon it, a bloated, hunched figure draped in a shroud of flesh and moss.

Vellgorn. The Rotfather.

His face was a ruin of blackened teeth and lidless eyes, his belly swelling with the pulse of something inside. Fungal antlers curled from his throne like antediluvian horns. He groaned—not words, but a sound like bloated rivers bursting underground, mixed with the rustle of dry leaves.

Then, in a voice like moldy thunder, he laughed.

“What walks my roots? Lost worms, wriggling through graves?”

Furg raised his axe. “We’re trying to find our way out.”



Vellgorn's laugh turned to a screech.

"You are out. Of time. Of worth. This is your last resting place!"

He surged forward, grotesque limbs dragging, fat body shuddering with unnatural strength. The throne cracked behind him.

Vellgorn lunged like a collapsing building—his fists made of rotwood and stone. He slammed the ground, sending a shockwave that knocked the party flying.

Valak tumbled, firing an arrow that sunk into his side—but it sprouted mushrooms instead of blood.

Furg charged, axe biting into the folds of Vellgorn's chest. The wound belched a stream of black pus and centipedes. Furg recoiled, vomiting.

Tobi darted behind the creature, slashing with his sword. He cut deep into the back of Vellgorn's leg—but the Rotfather didn't even flinch.

Then Vellgorn turned.

And with one shuddering roar, he lifted his leg and stomped down onto Tobi's head.

The floor cracked.

Tobi's skull exploded, blood and brain splattering the moss in a wide arc. There was no time for words. Just silence where a scream should've been.

“TOBI!” Furg roared, rage flooding his body as he launched himself again at Vellgorn, tears running down his cheeks. He struck with wild, endless fury.

Valak cried out as a vine whip lashed her side, tearing skin and ripping part of her tunic.

Vrexan jammed his spear into Vellgorn’s open belly, pushing through fat and into something brittle that crunched.

Vellgorn shrieked—then collapsed. His bulk hit the earth like a felled tower, sending a tremor through the ground. The throne burst into pieces. The roots shuddered and fell still.

Only the sound of dripping decay remained.

The chamber was silent.

Furg dropped to his knees beside Tobi’s broken body, shoulders shaking. He didn’t speak. He just lifted what was left, wrapped it in torn cloak, and hoisted him over his shoulder.

“We’re going home,” he whispered, voice like sand.

Vrexan collected 1100 gold from the dead king’s body. They walked, bloodied, broken, and slower now.

Hours passed. The tunnels curled and twisted like worms—but finally, a pair of stairs emerged from the dark, spiraling upward.

They climbed.

The stone returned. The air cleared. They stepped into torchlight once again, and the earth finally stopped pressing in.

No one spoke.

They just kept walking.

The tunnels wound downward again before curling into an arched, earthen corridor that groaned with age. The party pressed forward, worn but breathing, Rili trailing behind with her basket tucked tight beneath her arm.

Then she tripped.

The basket flew forward, mushrooms scattering across the damp floor, bouncing and rolling into the mud.

“Damn it,” she muttered, scrambling to gather them. “I picked every one of these with care...”

“Leave them if you must,” Valak said, helping her pick one up. “They’ll rot faster than we will.”

Furg turned his head.

That's when everything stopped.

From the wall beside them—not the floor, not a door, but the wall itself—burst a thing that didn't roar, didn't scream, didn't breathe. The sound of its emergence was a hole being torn in silence, like the absence of breath becoming a presence in the world.

A vast serpent-thing, its form layered in flickering scale and glistening folds of impossibility. No eyes. No mouth. No voice.

Just intent, terrible and pulseless.

Valak tried to shout something, but no words came.

The creature exhaled a spiral pulse. A wave of silence blasted outward, the tunnel going mute. Furg opened his mouth to curse—nothing came out. Valak reached for a spell and forgot the word halfway through the gesture. Vrexan staggered, blood trickling from one nostril.



Rili fell to her knees, clutching her head.

The Maw surged.

Its Siphon Grasp lashed across the room—striking Furg dead-on. A cold, wet tendril pulled from his body, draining strength. His arms sagged, vision blurred, and the wound didn't bleed—it forgot how.

“It's feeding!” Tobi yelled—or tried to. Only a whisper escaped his mouth.

Vrexan leapt forward, spear stabbing into its side, but the weapon skidded along strange, shifting flesh. The Maw moved through the wall, passing into solid stone and then back out again behind Valak.

She turned too slow.

The Maw struck, its presence forcing her knees to give out. She dropped her bow, reached for it, and forgot what a bow even was.

The Maw reeled back, a tremor shaking its form.

Then it collapsed inward, turning into a sphere of black flesh and thought—and exploded outward again in a blast of spatial collapse.

The terrain around them twisted—floors rippled like water, walls bent into curves. Stones floated briefly. Furg dropped to one knee, confused and shaking.

They all had to face fate. Everything felt like it was starting over.

Then came the Void Memory.

Valak stood to attack, then blinked—unsure why she'd drawn her blade.

Tobi swung his sword at nothing, forgetting the Maw was behind him now.

Only Vrexan held his course. He didn't remember—he sensed.

His spear drove through a section of the Maw that buckled and screeched without sound.

Furg regained his footing, swinging with fury and instinct. His sword bit deep.

Valak fired, arrowhead glowing faintly, and struck what looked like a core pulsing inside the Maw's midsection.

It spasmed.

A final burst of twisting silence flooded the room—and the Maw fell still.

Its form collapsed, curling into itself like a dying thought. Then it left behind a seed, dark and pulsing, no bigger than a man's fist.

They stared.

Furg stepped forward, spat blood onto the floor, and crushed the seed beneath his boot.

It screamed without sound as it died.

Nothing moved.

Then, slowly, sound returned—drips from the ceiling, the cracking of knuckles, the wet gasp of exhausted lungs.

Valak retrieved her bow. “We lived.”

Furg wiped grime from his face. “Barely.”

Rili just nodded, her face pale, arms shaking.

They walked.

Minutes passed. Then stairs appeared—stone, wet and crooked, rising upward into a shaft of blue sky and moss-filtered light.

The party stepped into the sun.

They were in the overgrown yard behind the ruined church—the same place they’d entered, hours or days ago.

None of them knew for sure.

Their boots hit earth, soft and good underfoot.

Furg carried Tobi’s wrapped body over his shoulder, his silence heavier than his weight.

They made their way through the trees, through the edge of Fereg Forest. Birds returned to song. Wind whispered through the branches. Rili clutched her basket tight again.

They followed the footpath all the way back.

By dusk, they saw the first stones of Mulhak rising on the horizon.

Home. Or what was left of it for those still standing.

Stalls and Swords

The guildhall was still heavy with the weight of recent loss. The banners hung low, and the torches gave off a dimmer glow than usual—whether from soot or grief, none could say. Murkar stood by the hearth, arms folded, steel jaw twitching slightly with restrained frustration. He paid the party 50 gold for saving Rili.

When the party arrived, still weary from their descent into rot and void, he didn’t offer greetings. Just a grunt.

“We’ve got a new mess. And no damn time to clean it with a mop.”

He dropped a parchment onto the war table—drawn in ink and grease, it showed the sprawling chaos of the Mulhak Market. Stalls, names, ownership markers, all hastily scrawled.

“The market’s on fire—not with blades, but with greed. Nessim Tarl—spice merchant, respected, long-standing—was poisoned. Still breathing, but he claims Rannor Velk, a rival grain baron, hired a gang to harass him and others. Pushing for territory. Stall rights. Even had stewards bought out.”

Valak frowned. “And the city guard?”

“Won’t lift a finger. Too many pockets lined on both sides. They call it ‘a merchant dispute’.” Murkar growled, slamming his metal fist on the table. “It’s politics, but if the market shuts down, so do half the supply lines to Mulhak.”

He looked them over.

“Get down there. Find out what’s happening. No street war. Handle it quick and clean. Talk first—fight if you have to. Keep the market open.”

Furg nodded slowly. “You want it quiet. Quiet we can do.”

They made their way to Mulhak’s south edge, where the market bloomed like a canvas of clashing colors and shouted bargains. Even with tension thick in the air, the aroma of saffron, roasted meats, inked parchment, and scorched brass filled every breath.

In a corner stall draped in faded red cloth, they found Nessim’s apprentice, a wiry young man with ink-stained fingers and a worried expression.

“Master Nessim’s resting. He took saffron tea after midday prayers—should’ve been safe. But within minutes he was on the floor, foaming and shaking. We barely got the poison flushed in time.”

Valak narrowed her eyes. “And he suspects Rannor Velk?”

The apprentice nodded. “He’s been making offers—pressuring others to move or sell. And some stalls have had... visitors. Thugs loitering. Things going missing. People scared to speak.”

Furg crossed his arms. “And the stewards?”

The apprentice lowered his voice. “Some of them have new coats. And coin they didn’t earn honestly.”

Vrexan sniffed the air. “Rot beneath the spice.”

The party moved deeper into the market, eyes sharp. Around the cinnamon stalls and dried fish carts, they spotted them—men who didn’t sell, didn’t buy, just watched. Hands on hilts. Words exchanged too fast to be casual.

The market was simmering, and the lid was starting to rattle.

The party moved carefully between stalls now, no longer tourists in a busy market but hunters among shallow graves. Mulhak's air smelled of sweat and spice, and tension clung to every raised voice and too-quiet corner. Merchants traded more glances than coin.

They stopped first at a string of tea sellers, parchment vendors, and jewel traders. Every tale had different spices, but the dish was the same.

"Rannor Velk moved his stall again—pushed right into my space," one silver merchant hissed. "Said his goods deserve the light. That his wares feed families, mine just glitter."

"His boys came through, real rough types," said a hook carver with shaking hands. "Knocked my table sideways. Told me the market's changing. Said if I didn't like it, maybe my cart would get a surprise one morning."

"Velk's bold," muttered another trader, eyes darting. "Claims 'the Club' watches his wares now. Says he doesn't need permission anymore."

They stopped at a cloth merchant's faded booth, where bolts of dyed wool hung limp in the heat. The vendor, a thin woman in her fifties, avoided eye contact until Valak crouched beside her, calm and patient.

"You've seen the Club, haven't you?"

The woman flinched. "I—I just sell thread..."

Valak leaned in, voice low. "You know what happens if Velk wins. You'll have your stall shoved into the sewer's mouth by next spring. Tell us."

The woman exhaled shakily. "It wasn't long ago. A soap vendor—Tamal—he stepped out of line. Two feet. Two feet of paving stone. The Knotted Club came that night. Broke his legs. Left him moaning under his own cart until morning."

Furg clenched his fists. "That's not a merchant guild. That's a protection racket with a shopping list."

They found Rannor Velk soon after, lounging under a bright orange canopy strung with brass windchimes and garlands of dried corn. His smile was too wide, his rings too polished.

"Well, well. The hired blades Murkar sends to count crates. What, tired of slaying monsters, now you're measuring tarp lengths?"

Valak said nothing. Furg stepped forward.

"People are scared. Things are being moved. Poison's in the air."

Rannor shrugged, casually cleaning his nails with a bone pick. "Markets change. So do alliances. And if someone's foolish enough to move their tent pegs again... well, accidents happen. Tea goes bad. People fall."

Furg's gaze drifted lower, catching a faint etching near the stall's base—a circle with a triple knot inside. He knew it well. Knotted Club sigil. Enforcer trash.

“They’re not even hiding anymore,” he muttered.

Valak touched her bow. “Time to find the root.”

They followed whispers to a nearby hookah den tucked behind a lantern shop. Inside, smoke hung thick as silk, and laughter echoed through shaded rooms. Past the lounging clients and distracted guards, they found a back chamber. Party crouched and watched in silence.

Four men sat at a table, coins spread before them, hands greasy with honeyed dates. A small iron chest rested behind them—half open, filled with folded notes and coin pouches marked with steward seals.

One man leaned back lazily, counting aloud. “Two for Jurval, one for Kint, and four for Velk. The new system’s working fine.”

The sun was low behind Mulhak’s buildings, casting long shadows over the spice market. The air smelled of turmeric, cardamom, and sweat. Civilians hurried along narrow alleys, heads down, whispering. And then the sound came—a grunt, a crash, and a scream.

The party ran to the the market corner and found them.

Six men stood in a loose circle around a spice vendor, fists raised. His stall had been overturned, bags of saffron and ground clove split across the dirt. One thug gripped the vendor’s collar, another raised a club.

Furg didn’t hesitate.

“Oi!” he barked, drawing his sword. “Drop him or I’ll make sure you never use that hand again.”

One of the thugs turned, sneering. “You think this is your street, guild-boy?”

Then the others stepped from the shadows. Ten more. Clubs, slings, short swords. Sixteen total. The alley pulsed with sudden violence.

Valak was already stringing her bow. “Looks like it is now.”

Vrexan surged ahead, spear flashing in the sunlight, his tail lashing behind him. He struck like a snake—low, quick, brutal. The first thug didn’t even scream before his thigh split open.

Furg held the center, sword ringing against metal as three men rushed him at once. He parried one strike, shoulder-checked a second into a wall, then drove his blade through the third’s gut in a clean, practiced motion.

Valak climbed onto a broken cart and fired from elevation, arrows punching through shoulders and legs. “Clear the path!” she shouted. “Push them back!”

The crowd scattered, carts overturned, market goods trampled.

One thug—barely more than a boy—turned to flee.

Vrexan caught him by the collar and slammed him against a wall. “You run for whom?”

The thug’s eyes widened. “We—we were just paid to scare off Nessim’s friends! Velk gave the order! Said he wanted ‘em gone quiet... and he paid extra for—”

“What?”

“The poisoned package! The saffron box! That was his coin!”

The last words were barely out before Vrexan threw him to the ground and marched back into the melee.

By the time it ended, six thugs lay groaning, five fled into the alleys, and the rest bled into broken crates. Furg sheathed his sword, bloodied and silent. Valak pulled her last arrow from a man’s shoulder and wiped it clean.

They returned to the market, dragging the captured thug and carrying a handful of incriminating notes taken from the gang’s stash.

Rannor Velk stood behind his stall, already trying to bribe the steward, his smile stretched too thin.

“What is this?” he barked as the party approached. “Coming to accuse a merchant in broad daylight now? You’ve no writ—no claim—no—”

Furg tossed a bloodstained pouch at his feet. “This came from your friends in the alley. And this one—” he yanked the captured thug forward “—says you paid for poison. Care to deny it now?”

The steward’s expression changed slowly. Fear gave way to rage.

“I want that man detained,” the steward said, voice cracking.

Rannor stepped back, drawing a dagger. “I built this market—!”

He lunged.

Valak’s boot met his chest mid-charge. He flew backward into his own stall, smashing through jars of imported honey.

Furg stepped over him, sword point pressed to his throat.

“You’re done.”

The gathered merchants had watched it all. Now, they cheered—shouting, clapping, calling Rannor every name under the sun.

The steward, pale and shaken, nodded. “I’ll see he’s processed. The guild will be informed.”

Valak looked around the square.

The market was loud again—but this time with voices of relief.

With Rannor Velk hauled off in chains, flanked by city enforcers and booed by his former customers, the tension that had strangled Mulhak’s market for days began to unwind like a knotted cord finally sliced clean. Merchants reclaimed their spaces with cautious hands. The air felt lighter. The silence that had lingered around certain stalls gave way to shouts, deals, and haggling voices once again.

The party walked the main avenue of the market like returning war-champions, though their blades were sheathed. Old men raised cups in greeting. Traders offered small gifts—bundles of dried cardamom, cuts of bright cloth, brass trinkets, and clean water wrapped in cool linen. None of it was asked for, but all was accepted with a quiet nod.

Nessim Tarl appeared by midday, walking with a cane and a slow limp, face still pale from the poison but eyes sharp with gratitude. He stood atop a crate and addressed the crowd.

“I thank those who stood when silence ruled this place,” he said, voice steady. “Let this be a market for goods, not grudges. We trade in wares—not fear.”

The merchants answered with claps and cheers, a few even banging pots together. The market was alive again.

The steward, perhaps shamed into action, stood with hands folded and announced that stall boundaries would be reviewed and enforced by neutral parties from now on. A group of guild-trained peacekeepers would patrol twice a day, drawn from both merchant volunteers and city-appointed watchers.

Valak stood nearby, arms crossed. “About time they stopped selling space like it was sweetbread.”

Furg snorted. “Too many stall lines, not enough spines.”

By evening, the party returned to the Murkars Fighters’ Guild. The sun cast golden bars of light across the stone floor as they entered, tired but clean, and for once, without blood trailing behind them.

Iron and Flame

The guildhall’s mess hall reeked of sweat, smoke, and stale meat—familiar comfort after weeks of crypt-dark filth and political rot. Furg sat at the center table, shoulders hunched over a row of frothy mugs, each heavier than the last.

He slammed the fourth one back in a single, deep gulp. Then came the long, gravelly burp, followed by an eye-watering fart that echoed against the stone bench like a signal horn from the bottom of a pit.

Valak choked on her bread. “By the gods, Furg, you could kill a cave troll with that.”

Vrexan hissed and took two steps away without a word, nostrils flaring.

Even a few nearby recruits paused mid-bite, stunned as the stench hit their breath stuck.

Tobi would’ve laughed, Furg thought bitterly. But he only chuckled to himself and leaned back, patting his gut. “Tastes like glory. And mold.”

The doors groaned open.

Murkar entered the hall, boots heavy, a sealed letter clutched in his gauntleted fist.

He didn’t waste words.

“Job from the Consortium. Comes with coin. You’ll take it.”

He tossed the scroll onto the table. Wax seal snapped as Furg opened it, squinting over the ornate script.

“Tarn Brasset, armorsmith,” Valak read aloud. “Needs raw iron from the Iron Pit to meet defense contracts.”

Murkar grunted. “Pit’s overrun. Goblins—clever ones. Set up barricades, flipped carts. Scavenged half the mine. Tarn can’t get a single ingot without bodies to break the swarm.”

Furg drained the dregs of his fifth mug, rose, and belched again. “Time to evict squatters.”

They reached the Iron Pit by mid-afternoon, upriver from the edge of Mulhak. The mine yawned open like a toothless mouth, ringed by warped fencing and rust-streaked signs. Barricades of splintered crates and broken mine carts sprawled across the entrance, and crude goblin symbols had been smeared in old blood across the stone.

Before they could approach, a shrill whistle rang out.

Arrows sliced from the ridgelines.

Eight goblins leapt from behind the debris—small, wild-eyed, armed with jagged blades and chipped spears. Two perched above, bows already drawn.

“Scatter!” Valak shouted, loosing an arrow mid-roll.

Vrexan surged left, spear flashing in an arc that gutted one skirmisher and dropped him twitching to the dust.

Furg stormed up the slope, deflecting an arrow with his shield before slamming into two goblins at once. His sword carved low, then high, splitting one's skull before backhanding another into a mine cart.

Valak's shots took both archers—one in the throat, the other through the eye.



Moments later, silence returned.

They moved deeper, deeper, through the mine's gullet. Flickering torchlight cast long shadows across rusted rails and ancient iron veins.

That's when they found Vexnig.

The Goblin Lord stood atop a pile of broken tools, a rusted crown wired from scrap on his brow. His cleaver was curved, wickedly sharp, and stained dark. Around him stood three goblin brutes, taller than most, wrapped in mismatched plate and iron scraps bolted into leather.

"You think this your hole?" Vexnig shrieked. "You think you take it back? This mine bleeds for me!"

Then the brutes charged.

The clash was brutal. Furg met one head-on, sword slamming against spiked iron, his shield cracking under the brute's hammer. Vrexan speared low, crippling another before dancing aside from a wild backswing.

Valak put an arrow into Vexnig's thigh—but he didn't flinch. He howled and charged, cleaver biting into Furg's side, cutting deep.

Furg roared, grabbing the goblin by the throat, pulling him close.

"This mine was yours," he growled, "now it's your tomb."

And he drove his sword up, through gut and spine.

Vexnig gagged, dropped his cleaver, and fell twitching to the stones.

With their lord dead, the remaining brutes faltered. Valak finished them cleanly, arrows finding gaps in makeshift armor. The mine fell quiet once more.

They took the rest of the day collecting what they could—lumps of raw iron, some still warm from forgotten veins. They loaded the mule cart in silence, weary and bloodied but satisfied.

As they made the slow journey back to the city, Furg rode at the front, wound bound tight beneath his mail, one hand steady on the mule's reins.

"We'll have coin, and Tarn will have his ore," Valak said softly.

Vrexan nodded, watching the treeline.

"But that mine remembers," he said. "It will not stay empty for long."

Smoke hung low over the upriver district, thick with iron and sweat. The clang of hammer against steel rang out like a bell of war, echoing down the alleys. As the mule cart rolled into Tarn Brasset's Forge, flames painted the soot-dark walls with flickers of orange and gold.

Tarn stood waiting, arms crossed, apron black with scorch marks. His beard was streaked with ash and braided short, eyes squinting against the light.

Furg stepped down, patting the mule. "Iron's here. Not a lump missing."

Tarn gave a curt nod. "You brought it. Now we use it. Job's not done 'til the steel sings."

The party dismounted and rolled up their sleeves.

Tarn put them to work.

Furg hauled coal from the pit, shoveling it into blazing forges that already burned hotter than a summer noon. His shirt clung to his back, soaked in sweat, but he worked without complaint. Tarn passed behind him once and muttered, "You lift like a smith's son."

Valak and Vrexan worked on the forge's damaged cooling system—the stone trough had cracked during the last collapse. Valak hoisted barrels of water while Vrexan shifted blocks into place, his tail helping balance each load with eerie grace. By midday, the water flowed clean again, hissing steam as it kissed the cooling iron.

Inside, the bellows needed constant motion to keep the fires from dropping. Valak manned them, arms aching but rhythm steady. “Feels like dragging breath out of a dragon’s throat,” she muttered.

When the time came to pour the molten metal, it was Furg who stepped forward. Tarn handed him the crucible, its glowing contents sloshing with deadly weight.

“This ain’t swinging a blade,” Tarn said. “One slip, and your boot fills with iron.”

Furg nodded once, steady as stone. He braced, tilted the ladle, and poured—slow, exact, into a plate mold. The liquid hissed, bubbled, and cooled in place, perfect.

Tarn watched, arms folded.

By the time dusk rolled over the district, the forge floor steamed and smoked. Tools clattered down. Tarn wiped his brow and looked at Furg.

“You’ve got good hands. Not just killing hands—building hands.”

He walked to a locked chest and opened it, revealing rows of polished gear. He lifted a set of masterwork plate mail—dull steel with deep etching, shaped for endurance, not flair.

“Four hundred gold,” he said, “and not a copper more. Guild discount. You’ve earned it.”

Furg looked the armor over, running his fingers along the reinforced shoulder plates. He nodded once.

“I’ll have it,” he said. “Soon as I’ve brought the coin.”

Tarn clapped him on the shoulder. “That’s a good dwarf.”

As the fire dimmed and the forge cooled, the party stepped outside into the orange-tinged streets. The work was honest. The reward? Nearly in hand.

For two long days and deep-bellied nights, the clamor of hammer on steel echoed across the upriver alleys. Sparks flew, smoke rolled, and Tarn Brasset’s forge became a den of fire and labor. The party took quarters in Tarn’s cramped guest house—four beds, one stove, and a floor that creaked like it remembered better days—but after weeks of mud and crypts, it felt like luxury.

By the third morning, the forge stood quieter. The flames had been fed, the molds poured, the work finished.

Tarn emerged from the back room with the armor slung over his shoulder. Furg’s plate mail. Gleaming even in low light, the suit caught every flame-flicker. It was built for war—broad-shouldered, seamless at the joints, edged with leather. Etched just beneath the gorget were faint marks—the sigils of the Fighters’ Guild, barely visible, meant only for those who knew.

Tarn placed it down with care and looked at Furg.

“Fit for a wallbreaker. And it’s yours.”

Furg stepped forward, jaw tight with pride. He didn’t say anything as he placed a pouch of 400 gold onto Tarn’s table, leaving him with 114 still to his name. He just ran a hand across the breastplate, fingers tracing the etching like reading a story carved in steel.

Valak leaned back, arms crossed. “He walks heavier now. Like a man ready to break doors down with his knees.”

Vrexan gave the chestplate a gentle tap with one claw. The ring was deep and strong. “Solid.”

Furg grinned.

Tarn handed each of them a smaller pouch—15 gold coins apiece—then nodded.

“You earned it, all of you. Come back anytime. If I’m smithing, you’ve got hands in my hall.”

They shook, not like merchants, but like warriors bound by ash and fire.

When the party returned to the Fighters’ Guild, it was evening. Murkar stood at the far table, a mug in hand, jaw twitching as he chewed some rootstock. He gave them a single look—Furg’s new armor catching the firelight—and smirked.

He raised his mug.

“You’re starting to look like proper steel.”

Furg lifted his own drink in return.

The guild hall roared to life behind them with talk, laughter, and the ring of blades sharpening.

Another job done.

Hard in battle

For four weeks, the sun rose over the Mulhak Fighters’ Guild to the sound of fists on flesh, blades on wood, and the deep, gritted voice of Murkar barking commands like thunder from a cracked mountain.

The training yard was a pit of packed dirt and sweat-stained stone, and it became the party’s new home.

Murkar—half-orc, battle-worn, and merciless—took personal charge of their drills. No soft-touch instructors. No breaks for bruises.

“Fighting isn’t about grace. It’s about staying upright when your bones scream,” he said the first morning, pacing the line with a hammer slung over his shoulder like a loaf of bread.

The days were brutal.

Furg charged in with his new plate mail gleaming—only for Murkar to sidestep and drive an elbow into his face. Furg staggered, nose bleeding, vision blurred.

Valak fired a shot mid-sprint—Murkar caught the arrow with one hand and tossed it back. Not to wound. Just to shame.

Vrexan moved in low, fast, aiming to knock Murkar off balance. One pivot and a boot to the ribs later, the lizardman lay sprawled on the dirt, unconscious for a minute, tongue slack and tail twitching.

“Get up,” Murkar growled, arms crossed. “The dead rest. You ain’t dead yet.”

And they did. Day after day. Bruised, bleeding, sore beyond thought—but stronger. Faster. Smarter.

Between drills, they gulped down water, bound their wounds, and sometimes shared a flask. Evenings brought bruised laughter and shared meals, feet propped on benches, mugs of dark ale raised high.

Murkar changed then—not the drillmaster, but the man.

One night, under torchlight, Valak asked him, “You always bark that loud?”

Murkar took a long swig of ale and leaned back, steel jaw clinking against the mug. “My voice was the only thing loud enough to keep wolves off my back when I was ten.”

Furg chuckled. “That the truth?”

Murkar smirked.

“I was born in the cliffs near Ul-Dam. My father died in a mine, never saw him. Mother bled out when I was six. My grandmother—a toothless crone with one eye—raised me with an iron ladle and a mean chant about dying with dignity.”

He glanced into the fire, jaw tightening.

“My cousin, Grugh—mean bastard. Beat me every day ‘cause he could. One night, he tried to drown me in the pig trough. I didn’t scream. Just grabbed his throat and didn’t let go. First death. I was nine.”

Valak sipped quietly, face unreadable.

Murkar shrugged. “A year later, a Worg broke into the grain house. Killed two goats. I found it sleeping near the hearth. Took a chain from the wall and strangled it while it slept. Sat on its back ‘til the breath stopped.”

Furg blinked. “Ten years old?”

Murkar raised his mug again.

“Didn’t sleep much that year.”

They drank in silence for a time.

Vrexan, rubbing a bruised jaw, muttered, “And now you throw students through walls.”

Murkar laughed. A short, gravelly bark. “I throw you into walls. You’ll thank me when some sellsword tries to take your head off in a back alley.”

He stood, stretching his arms.

“Tomorrow’s more shield drills. And I swear—if you drop that buckler again, Furg, I’m tying it to your neck.”

Furg grinned through a swollen lip. “Aye. As long as you carry me home after.”

Murkar turned, muttering, “I’ll carry your corpse if you’re lucky.”

But the smile lingered on his face as he walked off.

The training never got easier.

But the pain started to mean something.

And the party, forged under fire, began to feel like something sharper than warriors.

They were becoming weapons.

It was early morning when Valak and Vrexan returned from the smithy, the dull clink of new armor joining their footsteps. Valak wore her new chainmail, light enough for agility but dense enough to turn blades, the links glinting beneath her green cloak. She adjusted the leather strap under her new steel helmet, narrowing her eyes against the morning glare.

Vrexan followed, his own chainmail slightly looser, tailored for his lean, reptilian frame. His helmet was shaped low, almost sloped like a skullcap, a thin ridge down the center catching the light.

Furg stepped from the barracks with a heavy helm under his arm—blackened steel with a flared nasal bar. He slipped it on, the shadow covering his scarred brow.

“Not bad,” Valak said, eyeing him.

“Not light either,” Furg muttered. “Feels like wearing a pot with a curse on it.”

Vrexan tapped his own with a claw. “Better weight than an open skull.”

Moments later, a runner summoned them to Murkar’s office.

Inside, the old half-orc stood behind his desk, arms folded over a rolled-out map of the northern flats. A man in a patched brown coat, pale-faced and stinking of woodsmoke, stood beside him—a Farmers’ Council envoy, nerves fraying with every word.

“They’re vanishing. Whole families. We find burned icons where they prayed, livestock flayed, the fog thick as wool at night.” His voice cracked. “They come from the old Burytown ruins. Call themselves the Ash Dogs.”

Murkar slammed a fist on the desk. “Used to be a trade village. Died slow when the plague came. What’s left are bones and ghosts.”

“They’re not ghosts,” the farmer whispered. “They scream.”

Murkar turned to the party. His voice was iron.

“Exterminate them. No flags, no warnings. Dogs don’t negotiate.”

The road north was brittle with frost. Grass snapped beneath their boots, and the air carried the scent of damp ash and rot. Birds circled above—but none sang.

They passed scattered homes, windows boarded, doors marked with red Xs. Empty.

By dusk, they came to the edge of a ruined farmstead—blackened timbers smoldered under the wind. A fence was torn down. The barn lay in cinders. Smoke coiled up in lazy trails, like breath from a dying god.

Furg dismounted the mule, eyes narrowing. “We’re close.”

“Too close,” Valak replied.

They found it further on—an ambushed wagon, broken axles and blood-stained planks. Sheep corpses lay split open in a pile, organs arranged in circles on the dirt.

Painted on the side of the cart, in thick, dark blood, were three words:

“No Law Here.”

Vrexan crouched and sniffed. “Old blood. Two days, maybe three. But the trail is fresh.”

Valak knocked an arrow and stepped forward, voice calm but edged.

“Then we hunt before the fog rises.”

Furg adjusted his helm. “Let’s end these dogs.”

The wind picked up, cold and sour.

And Burytown waited ahead.

The road into *Burytown* wound through frostbitten trees and forgotten fences, all sinking into rot. The ruined village itself lay like a corpse with its bones picked clean—stone walls half-

collapsed, timber beams blackened with old fire, doors swinging on broken hinges. Ash drifted in the still air like snow that never melted.

Even the silence was unnatural.

Furg led the party past the remnants of what may once have been a granary—now just a hollow frame and scattered bones. Vrexan's spear tip swept side to side. Valak's bow was already drawn, arrow notched.

They moved between the skeletons of houses until they came to what was once the village square. There, beneath a cracked stone altar at the base of a shrine, something moved.

Furg stepped forward and lifted the slab just enough. A teenage boy looked up, his face gray with dust and fear. He squinted, lips trembling.

"Please... they took my family."

Valak crouched beside him. "Who?"

"The Dogs. Ash Dogs." He swallowed. "They take people to the Pit. Or... or the Smokehouse."

"The hell is that?" Furg asked, voice low.

The boy shook his head. "I don't know. But they scream."

A sudden clang rang out from behind them.

Then came the ambush.

From the ruined alleys and crumbling rooftops, eight Ash Dogs sprang—leather-wrapped, wild-eyed, smeared in soot and dried blood. They bore cleavers, sickles, hooked clubs—and no armor beyond scraps and madness.

The boy shrieked and scrambled back under the altar.

The party moved.

Vrexan met the first attacker with a low spin, spear plunging through the man's stomach and out his back. Furg turned just in time to catch a hooked rope around his leg—he stumbled, then hacked the line free with a growl.

Valak loosed an arrow into one charging Dog—hit clean in the chest. He kept running another four steps before dropping.

The fight was brutal, every strike messy and close.

One Dog threw sand into Valak's eyes—she fell back, blinking and cursing, loosing a wild shot that nicked another's shoulder.

Furg traded heavy blows with two at once, his sword ringing off cleavers and cracked teeth. One drove a spiked trap into the dirt, catching Vrexan's foot—he hissed but fought through it, dragging the trap with him like a chained beast.

They fought like animals, and died like them.

The last of them fell under Furg's sword—his leg mangled, jaw hanging loose.

But he smiled. Grinned.

"She's waiting," he said, voice thick with blood. "In the church. You'll scream louder than them."

Then his breath left him.

Valak wiped blood from her brow, eyes narrowing toward the church tower rising crooked above the ruins.

Furg looked to the others.

"We go now," he said. "Before whatever's in there finishes the next scream."

They moved, ash curling around their boots, the ruin watching.

The Dogs had barked. Now the pack's bitch awaited.

The trail led through the blackened remnants of Burytown's eastern fringe, where trees leaned like voyeurs and soot clung to the bones of buildings. Ahead, the Smokehouse waited—what once had been a meat-packing shed now black with mildew, rot, and the lingering scent of cooked flesh.

The door creaked open to a soundless void.

Inside, smoke clung low to the ceiling like a veil. Hooks dangled from chains above, some still swinging, others rusted dark. A rack of tanned skins—not animal—hung on the far wall. In the corner, three survivors sat chained to a rusted rail: a woman missing fingers, a man with a cauterized stump for an ankle, and a third barely breathing.

The woman lifted her head, eyes glazed with exhaustion.

"They... cook people," she whispered. "Drain the fat. Use it to oil blades. You have to stop her. Stop the Red Bride."

From outside came a cackle.

Then a crash of glass.

A firebomb burst through a broken window, igniting a row of straw-wrapped barrels.

"Move!" Furg roared, rushing to the prisoners.

The Dogs were already inside—six of them, armed with hooks, cleavers, and flaming brands. Two larger ones followed—the Butchers—wearing patchwork armor of bones and leather, shouldered with charred antlers and swinging heavy axes.

The fight erupted in a storm of fire and screaming.

Valak shot a raider through the eye before he could swing his torch.

Vrexan charged a Butcher head-on, spear jabbing low, catching the brute's thigh—but the Dog swung back, his flaming axe grazing Vrexan's shoulder, burning through mail and scale alike.

Furg freed the chained survivors with two swift sword blows, then turned to meet the other Butcher, blades clashing with a ring of steel and bone. The heat made the room a furnace, but he fought through it, sweat turning to steam on his armor.

One Dog tackled Valak into a wall—she drew her dagger and drove it up under his jaw before he could bite.

The flames grew fast, licking the rafters. Screams echoed.

Furg slammed the Butcher against a beam and split his skull open with a downward strike, caving helmet and face with a single blow.

Vrexan finished his own foe by impaling the man to the floor, then dragging him through the fire and into silence.

The Dogs fell, one by one.

Smoke curled toward the ceiling as the last firebomb burned out, sizzling in blood.

They pulled the survivors clear. Two would live. One did not make it—his breath gone before his chains broke.

The woman—her face streaked with ash—clutched Furg's arm.

“She sleeps in the church. Under the bell. They call her the Red Bride. She burns us in her dreams.”

They left her in the care of another villager hiding in the trees and turned toward the graveyard.

Frost coated everything now. The grass crunched beneath their boots.

Scattered bones littered the ground—children's, elders', animals, all strewn like a feast forgotten. Headstones were shattered or half-buried.

A doll sat beside a cracked skull, its face torn, one glass eye missing.

Furg looked down at it, then at the church.

“She’s waiting.”

Valak nodded. “Let her wait. We’ll bring silence.”

And they stepped between the stones, toward the broken tower and the bell that had long since fallen silent.

The church of Burytown loomed ahead like a wounded beast—its doors splintered, its bell tower nothing more than a cracked foundation and a pile of fallen stone. The stained-glass windows had been shattered, their shards glittering like colored teeth among the frost and soot. The building exhaled only stillness.

Furg pushed the doors open.

Inside, the air was cold and thick with the sour stench of death. Candles burned low, flickering against walls smeared with symbols—spirals, teeth, ash-colored handprints. In the nave, twelve corpses sat posed in mock prayer. Hands folded. Heads bowed.

Their faces were missing—peeled, carved off, and stitched crudely to the pews like masks of devotion. Where the altar once stood, a slab of bone and rusted iron waited.

Then she rose.

The Red Bride stepped from behind the altar, veil soaked in old blood. She wore mail that clung to her like rotted skin, her eyes burning beneath the tattered red that crowned her like a dead woman’s shroud. A rusted cleaver hung from her wrist on a chain of bone and steel, dragging behind her with each step like an executioner’s promise.

Eight Dogs emerged behind her—larger, scarred, hunched with animal posture. The strongest of the pack.

She didn’t speak.

She simply charged.

The Dogs came first. Furg stepped into the blow of a mace, helmet ringing with the impact. He staggered, then slashed low, catching a Dog’s knee and dropping him screaming. Valak rolled from a thrown hook and fired upward—her arrow piercing another’s throat, pinning him to the pulpit wall.

Vrexan fought in silence, a blur of spear and fang, weaving between three attackers at once. He took a blow to the ribs but drove his weapon through a skull in return.

The Red Bride screamed. Not a word—a sound, sharp enough to split thought. She lunged for Furg, cleaver dragging sparks across the stone before whipping around like a hammer on a chain. Furg barely raised his shield in time—the impact bent it.

Valak turned and loosed a shot. The Red Bride caught it with her shoulder, snarled, and kept coming.

They fought her like they fought the crypt-born and sewer fiends. But she was worse—a beast who remembered being human, but no longer cared.

She bit Furg's arm, drawing blood through the plate.

She ripped Valak's cloak and tore a line across her thigh.

She threw Vrexan across a pew, breaking wood and scale alike.

Still they fought.

Furg rose again, blood running down his gauntlet. "You're done," he snarled—and drove his sword through her gut, pushing it in with a howl of effort.

The Red Bride hissed—blood bubbling from her mouth. She reached for his face with trembling fingers.

"Ash... belongs to ash," she rasped. "You... don't get to rebuild."

Then she died, her body slumping forward, dragging the cleaver chain down in a final rasp of metal.

The Dogs lay dead around her, the altar slick with blood.

Outside, the smoke cleared.

Survivors stepped from cellars, from barns, from behind trees. Some sobbed. Others simply stared. A mother collapsed to her knees near the church steps and picked up a torn doll from the grass—one glass eye, stained with soot. She said nothing.

The party stood in silence.

No cheers. No thanks. Just the hollow wind moving through the bones of the village.

When they returned to Mulhak, boots black with blood and cloaks streaked with ash, Murkar met them with a nod.

He didn't ask for details.

He just raised his mug and muttered, "Hard miles. Hard hands."

The three of them sat in silence that night, staring into the hearth, where even the flames burned dull.

Some victories don't sing.

They just end.



